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Nature, Spirituality and Place

Comparative Study between American Transcendentalism and Chinese Religions

Edited by
Shan Gao and Benjamin Coles

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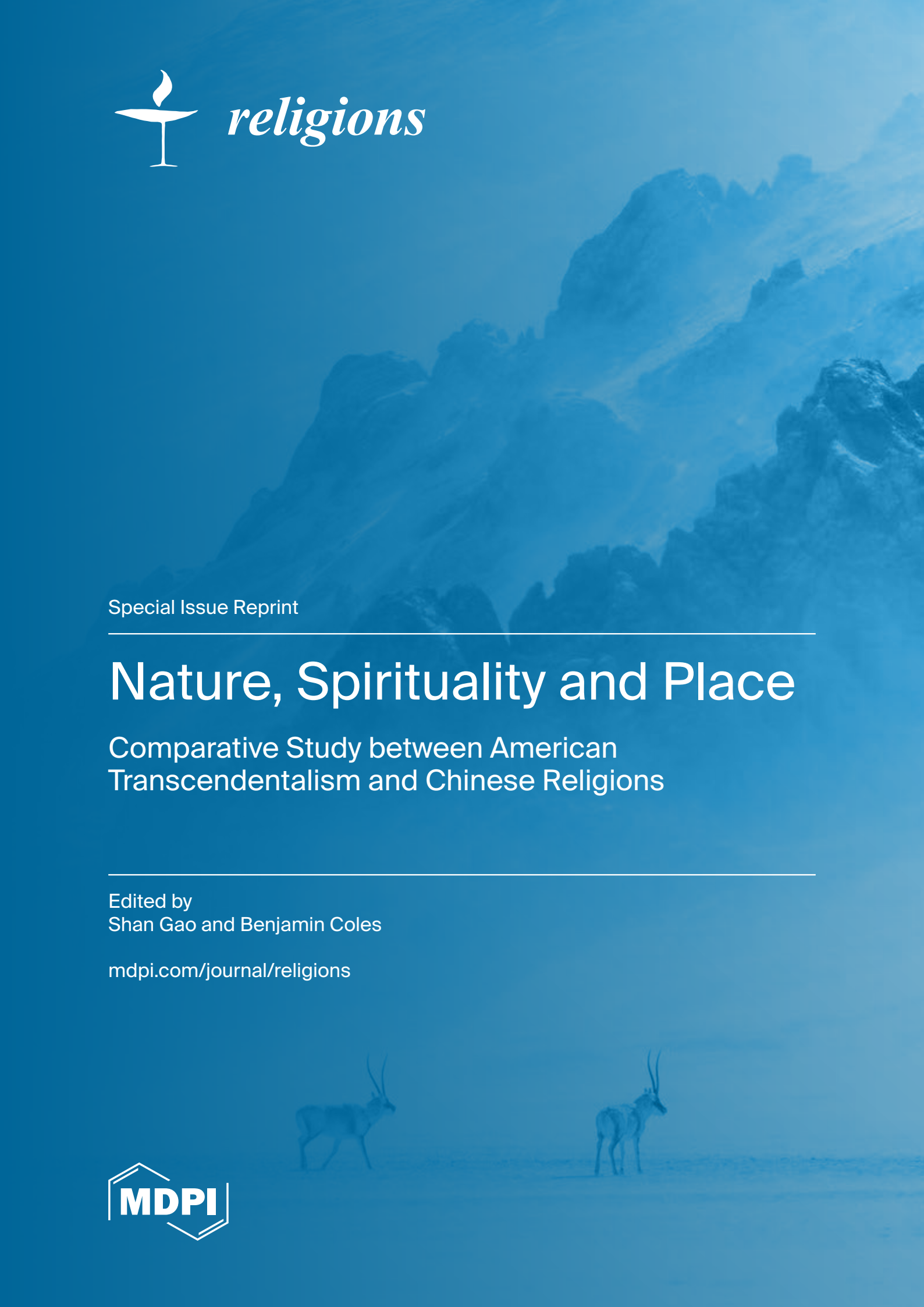

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About the Editors

Shan Gao

Shan Gao obtained her Doctoral degree in the field of environmental philosophy from The University of North Texas. She is currently working as an associate professor at the Philosophy Department of Soochow University. Her research areas are comparative philosophy, environmental aesthetics, and environmental ethics. She has published many articles in comparative studies between Emerson and Chinese philosophy and religion. She was the Guest Editor for a Special Issue of *Nature*, entitled "Wilderness and Civilization: Perspectives from Chinese Scholars". She also founded the center for Nature, Wilderness and Civilization (NWC). She is also the Editor-in-Chief of a book series entitled *Nature Aesthetics: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Dialogue* with Spinger.

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Benjamin Coles has a BA in Philosophy from the University of Nottingham, an MA in Continental Philosophy from the University of Warwick, and a PhD in Chinese Philosophy from Renmin University of China. He currently works as a Lecturer in the School of Philosophy and Social Development at Huaqiao University in Xiamen. His research focuses on Chinese thought from the Wei-Jin period, pre-Qin Confucianism and Daoism, Ming Dynasty Neo-Confucianism, and comparative philosophy. He also has extensive experience working on Chinese–English philosophy translations, has recently published a translation of Zhang Xuezhi's *History of Chinese Philosophy in the Ming Dynasty*, and is currently working on a contemporary philosophical translation of the *Book of Changes*.

Preface

Many scholarly works have been completed in comparative studies between American transcendentalism and Chinese Philosophy and Religion. However, little work has been devoted to the concept of nature, which represents a key value in both American and Chinese Culture. This Special Issue is part of the larger research project I aim to develop over the next ten years: Nature Aesthetics: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Dialogue. This Special Issue aims at exploring how nature is interpreted and aesthetically appreciated in American transcendentalism, Chinese Daoism, and Hmong Spirituality in China. We conduct this comparative study from three dimensions which are implied in the concept of spirituality as follows: metaphysics and the ultimate value; self-transcendence, and spiritual practices.

In this Special Issue, there are three articles which are devoted to comparative studies between American transcendentalism and Chinese Daoism. These articles include Shan Gao's *Nature, Spirituality, and Place: Comparative Studies between Emerson and Zhuang Zi*, Xuehong Jia's *Beauty and Dao: The Transcendental Expressions of Nature from Emerson's Prose and the Zhuang Zi*, and Matthew Crippen's *Chinese Thought and Transcendentalism: Ecology, Place and Conservative Radicalism*. Through the three articles, the reader can gain a better understanding of why self-transcendence is closely connected to the concept of nature in American transcendentalism and Daoism. They can also help us understand why the aesthetic appreciation of nature takes a different form in American transcendentalism and Chinese Daoism.

There are three articles focusing on Chinese Daoism and its religious source. Zhejia Tang and Xuedan Li's *Juedi Tiantong: The Religious Basis of the Relationship between Tian and Man in Ancient China* provides a deep insight on religious origins in Daoism's interpretation of the concept of nature. Shaojun Wang's *The Realm of Tian Fang Advocated by the Daoist Philosophy of Naturalism* discusses Daoist ontology and its metaphysical support for the value and significance of empirical things. Jing Liu's *Nature Prescribes Laws to Humans: The Ziran of the Myriad Things in Early Daoism* provides the conceptual analysis of the concept of nature (ziran) in Daoism and why it prescribes laws to Humans.

In this Special Issue, there are also another three articles devoted to the concept of places and their role in spiritual cultivation. The places include mountains, wilderness, and agricultural land. These articles are Benjamin Coles' *Sites of Solitude: Situating the Wilderness of Nature in Wei-Jin Dark Learning*, Yun Wang and Yaoxuanze Xiao's *Chinese Chan Buddhism and the Agrarian Aesthetic in the Garden*, and Yingjin Xu, Canxu Zeng, Xiaoxiang Tang,Ying Baim and Xin Wang's *Nature, Place, and Ritual: Landscape Aesthetics of Jingfu Mountain "Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands" in South China*. There is also one article focusing on Hmong Spirituality and the sense of nature and place, which is authored by Yunjie Zhang. This article discusses the future project following the Special Issue, which is an examination of Chinese ethnic groups, spirituality, and their sense of place.

The authors come from three countries (China, America, and South Korea) and five different schools which include the School of Philosophy and Development, School of Architecture and Civil Engineering, School of Humanities, School of Chinese language, and School of Literature and School of Global Studies. They all focus on the concept of nature from interdisciplinary and intercultural perspectives. This opens up the next decade of a project of a book series entitled *Nature Aesthetics: Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Dialogue* with Spinger.

I would like to give my deepest thanks to the following scholars who have made great contributions to the Special Issue and my future project: Professor Joseph Urbas from SPH (Sciences, Philosophy, and Humanities), Professor Yuedi Liu (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), Professor

Nick Guardiano from Southern Illinois University, and Professor Samantha Harvey from Department of English Literature. Their online lectures on Emerson which are organized by the Center for Nature, Wilderness and Civilization (NWC) provided me with a lot of inspiration. Dr. Li Xu from the department of Art Education in the University of North Texas makes a large contribution in organizing the online events of NWC. I also would like to thank the previous President Prentiss Clark in Emerson Society who helped me connect with a lot of scholars who focus on Emerson research. My colleague Huanzhong Han, a devoted scholar in Chinese religion (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism), plays a very important role in the Special Issue since he helped with organizing four workshops in famous temples in China (Hanshan Temple, Xiyuan Temple, Baoyan Zen Buddism Temple). Lastly, I would like to thank my husband, Haijian Liu from the Hanzhou Normal University. He has supported me in getting access to wilderness areas while I pursue my doctoral degree in the field of environmental philosophy. Without direct encounters with the wilderness, this Special Issue and the next decade-long project regarding a book series on nature aesthetics would not have come into being.

Shan Gao and Benjamin Coles
Editors

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Article

Nature, Spirituality, and Place: Comparative Studies between Emerson and Zhuang Zi

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Abstract: Very rich scholarly works have been produced to perform a comparative study between Emerson and Zhuang Zi. Many scholars in their comparative research have tried to find how Emerson and the transcendentalists such as Thoreau borrow ideas from Daoism. In this article, I will take a different approach. I aim to find how Emerson and Zhuang Zi's pursuit of spirituality in nature shapes different types of sense of place. The concept of spirituality is related to the pursuit of meaning in life and self-transcendence. This concept has gradually gained attention from the branches of religion, philosophy, geography, and psychology since, currently, due to the fast urbanization process, more people are separated from their land and move into cities. I will make a comparison between Emerson and Zhuang Zi from the concepts of spirituality, nature, and place. This perspective will shed light on the question of the conservation of various places due to their value and meaning, although I will not discuss conservation issues in this paper. In this article, I will first give a brief introduction to the meaning of spirituality by focusing on the three dimensions of this concept, which include meaning, self-transcendence, and spiritual practices. Then, I will discuss how the concept of nature in Emerson and Zhuang Zi's works is related to these three dimensions. Finally, I will examine why Emerson and Zhuang Zi treat wilderness and agricultural land, respectively, as a place.

Keywords: spirituality; nature; place; ultimate reality; self-transcendence

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1. Introduction

Rich scholarly research works in the comparative research on Emerson and Chinese religions have been produced in the past 50 years. These works include *Versluis' American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (Arthur Versluis 1993), Zhichao Xie's Research on American Transcendentalism's Acceptance of Confucianism (Zhichao Xie 2012), and Mansu Qian's *Emerson and China: Reflection on Individualism* (Mansu Qian 1996). In these works, comparative studies between Emerson and Zhuang Zi have been addressed by many scholars. Scholars who conduct these comparative studies between American transcendentalism and Chinese religions take a similar approach: they try to find how Emerson borrows ideas from Chinese religions and integrates them into his thoughts. I argue that due to the lack of access to Chinese religious texts and the lack of understanding of the Chinese language, Emerson sometimes just used these ideas to support his positions. but this is not based on his deep understanding of these ideas. However, in this paper, I will not discuss this; rather, I will take an alternative approach to the comparative studies between Emerson and Zhuang Zi by using the concepts of nature, spirituality, and place. In recent years, a similar approach as the one I will use to conduct comparative studies has emerged. Scholars such as Matthew Crippen (2023), Wang and Xiao (2023), and Thompson and Xu (2023) have taken a similar approach in their recent research articles in the Special Issue titled "Nature, Spirituality and Place". However, little research has been conducted in terms of the comparative studies between Emerson and Zhuang Zi from the perspective of nature, spirituality, and place. Peter D. Hershock and Roger T. Ames (Hershock

and Ames 2019) published a book titled *Philosophy of Place: An Intercultural Conversation*. They used the concept of place to perform cross-cultural comparative studies. However, many research articles in this book, such as Steven Burik's article on *Heidegger and Daoism*, neglect the important point that their sense of place is mostly shaped via their different metaphysical understandings of nature and pursuit of spirituality with nature. In this article, I aim to explore why Emerson and Zhuang Zi's pursuit of spirituality in nature shapes their different kinds of sense of place. Wilderness is particularly important in the former's conceptualization of place, whereas the latter's understanding revolves around cultivated land and especially agricultural settings. In the first part of this paper, I will discuss the concept of spirituality in terms of two dimensions, which are the pursuit of meaning and the achievement of self-transcendence. In the second part of my paper, I will make a comparison between Emerson and Zhuang Zi in their different metaphysical interpretations of nature from two aspects: spiritual power versus bio-spiritual power, and purposeful action versus purposiveness without purposeful action. In the third part of this paper, I will focus on the logical relationship between the metaphysical interpretation of the nature of Emerson and Zhuang Zi and their relationship with the pursuit of meaning of life via self-transcendence. I will focus on two aspects: their understanding of the self and self-transcendence toward nature. Lastly, I will discuss how their pursuit of the meaning of life via nature shapes different kinds of sense of place. In my discussion, I point out that there are both similarities and differences between Emerson and Zhuang Zi in their understanding of nature, spirituality, and place. The similarities lie in the fact that their interpretations of nature both encourage the direct experience of material nature and aesthetic appreciation so that material nature becomes a place. The differences lie in the fact that Emerson's interpretation of nature encourages the appreciation of wilderness more than cultivated places such as agricultural land. By comparison, Zhuang Zi's interpretation of nature encourages more appreciation of cultivated land such as agricultural land.

1.1. Spirituality

In the past 50 years, extensive research has been conducted on the philosophical and religious interpretations of the concept of spirituality. One of the reasons is that due to the fast development of science, technology, and urbanization, societies are becoming more secular. When belief in traditional deities is no longer strong, many people start to find spirituality in different areas of life. Various disciplines that interpret life in different ways also focus on research on the concept of spirituality and its relationship with their areas. Many scholars in the field of philosophy and religion have written books or articles explaining this concept such as Irving Singer (2010), John Cottingham (2005), David McPherson (2017), and Robert C. Solomon (2002). In this article, I will not focus on the definitions and interpretations of the concept of spirituality; rather, I will focus on the two essential interrelated aspects of spirituality: (1) the pursuit of meaning in life, and (2) self-transcendence toward objects that are regarded as being meaningful.

1.2. Spirituality and Meaning

The concept of spirituality is closely related to meaning. It contains human beings' innate desire for the pursuit of meaning in life. In the past 60 years, there have been many theories of meaning including supernaturalism, objective naturalism, subjective naturalism, and hybrid naturalism. Supernaturalism claims that life will be meaningful if we orient our life toward God, soul, or spiritual beings, which are regarded as the ultimate reality, and we must believe in them to live a meaningful life. Objective naturalism claims that our life is meaningful if we are connected with objective values that are independent of divine consciousness and human beings' judgment. The representative for this school is Thaddeus Metz. (Thaddeus Metz 2013). His "fundamentality theory" claims that human beings' lives will be meaningful if they use their reason to orient their life rationality toward the fundamental conditions of human existence. For him, there are objective values in the world. If human beings contribute to the values, whether they enjoy doing it or not,

their actions and lives are meaningful. Subjective naturalism claims that the meaning of life lies in achieving what one wants or enjoys, and it does not matter whether what he or she enjoys has value for its own sake. Hybrid naturalism is something between objective naturalism and subjective naturalism. Susan Wolf gave this form of hybrid naturalism a very concise definition: "Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets object attractiveness." (Susan Wolf 2010, p. 9). Although Emerson and Zhuang Zi never put forward the theory on the meaning of life, we can use these theories to analyze their pursuit of spirituality in nature. Emerson and Zhuang Zi's pursuit of spirituality in nature can be categorized as something between supernaturalism and hybrid naturalism. For them, there is a transcendental reality, which is God and *Dao*, and there are objective values in God and *Dao*. Our lives will be meaningful if we form a relationship with the ultimate reality. However, they both pay much attention to our everyday life since God and *Dao* are both immanent in all things in nature. We can form a relationship with the ultimate reality through establishing a close relationship with the world we live in.

1.3. Spirituality and Self-Transcendence

Spirituality also contains the idea that human beings have an innate desire to achieve self-transcendence. What, then, is the meaning of self-transcendence? For the purpose of this article, I borrow John Nolt's definition of self-transcendence since he pays much attention to this concept's relationship with nature. In the article titled "Hope, Self-Transcendence and Environmental Ethics", he defines this term: "self-transcendence is to be understood as follows: a person (*subject*) is self-transcendent toward an object if and only if that object is distinct from her and she values its good as an end." (John Nolt 2010, p. 163). He points out that the object can either be another person or nature. However, after a discussion of different forms of self-transcendence to persons, he argues that human beings must self-transcend to nature rather than other human beings. No matter the form of self-transcendence, we can discover a thinking paradigm in this dimension of spirituality. (1) The self we experience in everyday life is usually the false self or narrow self, which is motivated by the pursuit of external good such as wealth, fame, or health. (2) There is a true self that is related to ultimate reality, but we tend to ignore it. (3) We need to cultivate moral power to transcend the false self and achieve the authentic self. Although Emerson and Zhuang Zi give us very different interpretations of self-transcendence, their ways of thinking follow the same thinking paradigm as that mentioned above. They both think that the self we experience in everyday life tends to be false or narrow. For Emerson, we tend to be so attached to the surface while ignoring the final cause of all things. In contrast, for Zhuang Zi, we tend to devote our life to the purposeful pursuit of fame, reputation, knowledge, virtue, and so on, and we ignore our true self which is derived from the ultimate reality, *Dao*, which is the self without any purpose. Emerson and Zhuang Zi both point out that we should overcome the false self and become united with the ultimate reality to achieve the true self via continuous effort.

2. Metaphysical Dimension of Nature and Meaning

The Chinese translation of Emerson's concept of nature is *ziran*, which is the same as Zhuang Zi's concept of nature. Although the translation is the same, their metaphysical meaning of nature differs greatly. In fact, there is no corresponding word for Emerson's concept of nature in the Chinese vocabulary. Z. Wang (2018, p. 18) has provided us with very authoritative research and he points out that the translation of the Western concept of nature into the Chinese characters of *ziran* is derived from Japan. When the Japanese translate the Western concept of nature in the contemporary world into *ziran*, their understanding of *ziran* is related to natural objects, science, naturalism, and so on. In the early English–Chinese dictionary, which was compiled by Robert Morrison, the Western concept of nature is usually translated into "those properties which men and things have originally"; "principles of nature"; and so on. In this article, I will not deeply investigate the translation. Rather, I will discuss how their different metaphysical interpretations of

nature are connected with values. After giving a deep metaphysical analysis of Emerson and Zhuang Zi's metaphysical interpretation of nature, we can better understand why their concept of nature differs on a very deep level. In this part, I will make a comparison between Emerson and Zhuang Zi in their different metaphysical interpretations of nature and then discuss why their metaphysical interpretations of nature are related to meaning from two perspectives: (1) spiritual power versus psychophysical power; (2) purpose versus purposiveness without purpose. Before I go deeper into the metaphysical interpretation of nature, I think it is necessary to briefly address the logical relationship among power, purpose, value, and meaning. By meaning, I refer to meaning in life. It is deeply related to purpose. Purpose refers to ultimate destinations for human beings which lie not in physical places but rather in ultimate values. The values mainly include truth, beauty, and good.

2.1. Nature and Power

Through their conceptions of nature and spiritual power and ziran (self-so) and psychophysical power, respectively, Emerson and Zhuang Zi both hold the view that there exists an ultimate reality that contains power to generate and maintain the material world. "This is the ultimate fact which we so quickly reach on this as on every topic, the resolution of all into he ever blessed One." (Emerson 1983, p. 272). For Emerson, the ever-blessed One is the ultimate reality. He often uses other equivalent terms to express the idea of the blessed One. These terms include God, reason, spirit, oversoul, final cause, efficient nature, and so on. For Zhuang Zi, the ultimate reality is Dao. "That Course has its own tendency and consistency, but without any deliberate activity or definite form." (Zhuang 2009, p. 42). The Course is an alternative translation of Dao. In this sentence, tendency and consistency refer to the idea that Dao really exists. It is not an illusion. However, their interpretation of power differs greatly. The former stresses spiritual power while the latter stresses bio-spiritual power. For Emerson, the ultimate reality is spiritual, and it creates the material world without relying on any material substances. In contrast, Zhuang Zi thinks that the material world, which is made up of vital energy, is not created but a given reality. In order to better understand these two concepts, it is necessary to locate the two important concepts that are often used by Emerson and Zhuang Zi to express ultimate reality: efficient nature and the Dao. Emerson wrote two essays titled "Nature". The first essay was written in 1836 and the second was in 1844. It was in his second essay titled "Nature" in which he put forward the concept of natura naturata and natura naturans (Branch and Mohs 2017, pp. 153–54). The former refers to the production of efficient nature, which is also termed as passive nature. The latter refers to the cause of passive nature. From this, we can find that Emerson's concept of nature includes two aspects: efficient nature and material nature. For efficient nature, Emerson also used many other terms to express this concept. These terms include "supreme Cause," "spirit and God", "reason", "thought", "transparent law", and so on (Emerson 1983, pp. 28, 40, 47, 272, 403). It is the spiritual metaphysical power that creates the material world and directs the changing process of the material world. For the effects of efficient nature, Emerson used many metaphors to express it. A list of these metaphors can help us better understand Emerson's concept of Nature. These metaphors include "incarnation of thought", "God's book", "exhibition of God's benevolence", "symbol", and "metaphor or image of human mind" (Emerson 1983, p. 555). In terms of the relationship between efficient nature and material nature, the terms of cause and effect can help us better understand it. Emerson states that "Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be severed; for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end preexists in the means, the fruit in the seeds." (Emerson 1983, p. 200). Then, what is efficient nature? Emerson explains this concept as follows: "But taking timely warning, and leaving many things unsaid on this topic, let us no longer omit our homage to the Efficient Nature, *natura naturans*, the quick cause, before which all forms flee as the driven snows, itself secret, its works driven before it in flocks and multitudes, (as the ancient represented nature by proteus, a shepherd), and in undescribable variety. It pub-

lishes itself in creatures, reading from particles and spicula, through transformation on transformation to the highest symmetries, arriving at consummate results without a shock or a leap." (Emerson 1983, p. 546). The concept of efficient nature in Emerson's works is often used interchangeably with other concepts including God, Reason, Thought, Oversoul, Spirit, Supreme Nature, and so on. Efficient nature contains two forms of power: creative power and transformative power. Creative power refers to the idea that efficient nature is forever in the process of creating new forms and this power will never be exhausted. By transformative power, Emerson means the metamorphosis of forms. The term metamorphosis is synonymous with the terms of transition or transformation. It means that within the form of each creature, there is a force that impels this creature to higher forms (Emerson 1971–2013, vol. 3, p. 12). The creative power and transformative power are different expressions of the same spiritual power which emanates from efficient nature. The power is purely spiritual and not blended with any material elements. For Emerson, it is the thought (spiritual power) that creates the body and things, as he states that "Everything was first a thought, only thinking makes things." (Urbas 2021, p. 47).

The concept of ziran (nature) appears in Zhuang Zi's works many times, but the meaning of nature is very different from Emerson's concept of efficient nature. The Chinese characters for nature are made up of two words: *zi* (自) *ran* (然). The meaning of *ziran* is spontaneity or self-so. This concept is often used together with two other concepts which are *Dao* and *Qi* (vital energy). They are all expressions of the ultimate reality. *Ziran* refers to the way that the ultimate reality *Dao* moves. In terms of the meaning of *Dao*, Zhuang Zi describes *Dao* as follows: "That Course has its own tendency and consistency, but without any deliberate activity or definite form. It can be transmitted but not received, attained but not shown. Being its own root and its own foundation, it exists firmly even when heaven and earth are not yet there. It makes the spirits and the Lord-on-High divine, generates both Heaven and earth. It is above the summit without being high, beneath the nadir without being deep. It precedes heaven and earth without being of long duration. It is elder to the earliest antiquity without being old." (Zhuang 2009, p. 43). For Zhuang Zi, *Dao* exists, and the existence of *Dao* is beyond doubt, and it is the ultimate reality. The self-generating power of *Dao* is also called *ziran*. This concept is also closely related to *qi*, the vital energy of which everything is made. There are two opposing forces within vital energy: *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* are opposing energies but are also mutually supportive. There is a very rich relationship between them. In this aspect, Wang Robin R. gave a very insightful interpretation. She points out that the *yin* and *yang* relationship includes the following types: contradiction and opposition, independence, mutual inclusion, interaction, complementary, and transformation. The interaction of *yin* and *yang* is spontaneous without any external forces. Zhuang Zi calls this interaction *ziran*.

2.2. Nature, Power, and Meaning: Purpose versus Purposiveness without Purpose

In the above, I examined Emerson and Zhuang Zi's concept of nature and its relationship with power. The former stresses spiritual power and the latter bio-spiritual power. In this section, I will discuss the interrelationship between power, meaning, and purpose. For both Emerson and Zhuang Zi, nature has meaning. The meaning in nature lies in the key concept which is purpose. Emerson stresses efficient nature's purpose which lies in ultimate values. In contrast, Zhuang Zi stresses purposiveness without purpose, which also contains ultimate values. I will discuss this in detail as follows. For Emerson, the spiritual power in efficient nature has direction. It moves up in the sense that it is directed by purpose which is related to ultimate values. Those values can be summarized in three essential elements which are good, beauty, and truth. "The world thus exists to the soul to stratify the desire of beauty. Extend this element to the uttermost, and I call it an ultimate end. No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same." (Branch and Mohs 2017, p. 83). When these values combine together, Emerson sometimes uses the word ecstasy to express this

idea. Emerson says, "And because ecstasy is the law and cause of nature, therefore you cannot interpret it in too high and deep a sense. Nature represents the best meaning of the wisest man." (Branch and Mohs 2017, p. 103). This is the deeper metaphysical reason why Emerson tries to pursue spirituality in nature. For Emerson, nature represents the best meaning for human beings. In the following, I will address in detail the spiritual power in Emerson and how this concept is related to values.

Emerson's understanding of spiritual power includes two aspects: creative power and transformative power. Both kinds of power follow the values of good, truth, and beauty. Among these values, the value of good is very important. Emerson also terms good as a moral force. He sometimes uses moral force (power) to express creative and transformative power. He says, "To a true scholar the attraction of the aspects of nature, the departments of life, and the passages of his experience, is simply the information they yield him of this supreme nature which lurks within all That reality, that causing force is moral. The Moral Sentiment is but its other name." (Urbas 2021, p. 100). By moral sentiment, Emerson refers to the ultimate causing force, efficient nature. From this word, we can find that the creative power or force of efficient nature is value-laden. It is an alternative expression of spiritual law, which is a combination of truth, goodness, and beauty. For Emerson, creative power and transformative power are not only good but also beautiful. The beauty is based on necessity or truth. He says, "All departments of life at the present day,—Trade, Politics, Letters, Science, or Religion,—seem to feel, and to labor to express, the identity of their law. They are rays of one sun; they translate each into a new language the sense of the other. They are sublime when seen as emanations of a Necessity contradistinguished from the vulgar Fate, emanations of a Necessity contradistinguished from the vulgar Fate, by being instant and alive, and dissolving man as well as his works, in its flowing beneficence This influence is conspicuously visible in the principles and history of art." (Urbas 2021, p. 146). For Emerson, all departments of life are expressions of the spiritual law or principles. When this law emanates from the necessity which refers to the truth or knowledge of God, it is sublime. This law is not fixed or dull; rather, it is very lively and beautiful and is based on the truth.

Zhuang Zi's concept of *ziran* (*self-so*) is made up of two Chinese words: self (自) and so (然). Self-so refers to the idea that Dao creates everything without deliberate activity or following any spiritual laws of divine consciousness. It is a self-generating process without any guidance. It has the meaning of purposiveness without purpose. In speaking of purposiveness without purpose, I borrow the concept from Kant. Kant explained this concept in his critique of judgment. For him, beauty belongs to purposiveness without purpose. I use the term not in the Kantian sense but as an analogy. Life itself is the final purpose. In terms of the concept of *ziran*, many traditional views on it stress the value of freedom. However, recent scholarship has given this concept more attention. Professor Wang Bo provides us with an insightful viewpoint suggesting that the concept of *self-so* is not value-neutral but value-laden (B. Wang 2018, pp. 43–53, 128–29). Based on his extensive linguistic studies of the term self-so, he argues that the concept of nature (*self-so*) demonstrates that everything, that is, self-so, has value for its own sake. However, he does not tell us what the value is. I argue that the value of self-so combines three elements, which are truth, good, and beauty. Although Zhuang Zi does not define the three elements, we can obtain the general idea of them from his works. For Zhuang Zi, truth is not related to any spiritual principles as Emerson claims; rather, it refers to the spontaneous process of vital energy. This process is self-so, which means that it is not directed by any supernatural power or consciousness. Zhuang Zi's term for the concept of good is virtue. Virtue refers to power, which comes from being self-so without any deliberative activities or predetermined plans. Additionally, beauty is also related to self-so. Zhuang Zi has the expression of beauty in his work. He says, "Heaven and earth possess vast beauties, but they do not speak of them. The four seasons have their unconcealed regularities, but they do not discuss them. Each of the ten thousand things makes its own perfect sense but does not explain it." (Zhuang 2009, p. 86). Beauty for Zhuang Zi is not related to any spiritual principles as Emerson understands;

rather, it is related to the spontaneous activity of nature. From the above, we can find that the combination of truth, good, and beauty in Zhuang Zi all centers on spontaneity. Zhuang Zi's understanding of truth is not related to spiritual principles which direct the change as Emerson understands. Rather, it is related to the process of change. Zhuang Zi's understanding of truth is not based on scientific knowledge since, in his lifetime, modern science had not yet developed. His understanding of truth refers to the process of change which is caused by *yin* and *yang*. In terms of *yin* and *yang*, he does not challenge it but accepts it as the precondition of his understanding of *Dao*. *Yin* and *yang*'s action is spontaneous, which is the foundation for the virtue of *Dao*. The virtue of *Dao* refers to its vitality, and it will never perish and degrade. This power will always be in the action. Zhuang Zi's concept of Great Beauty is also related to truth. "Heaven and earth possess vast beauties, but they do not speak of them. The four seasons have their unconcealed regularities, but they do not discuss them. Each of the ten thousand things makes its own perfect sense but does not explain it." (Zhuang 2009, p. 86). The great beauty transcends all perspectives or standards. It is also not based on the necessity of nature as Emerson argues. For Zhuang Zi, we can never know the truth of nature since it is always in the process of changing. "For our understanding can be in the right only by virtue of a relation of dependence on something, and what it depends on is always peculiarly unfixed. So how could I know whether what I call the Heavenly is not really the Human? How could I know whether what I call the Human is not really the Heavenly?" (Zhuang 2009, pp. 40–41). Zhuang Zi's understanding of the good of *Dao* is termed virtue.

3. Self-Transcendence towards Nature

I have discussed why Emerson and Zhuang Zi's metaphysical interpretation of nature is full of meaning and ultimate values. This is also the deeper reason why they both pursue spirituality in nature. In terms of the relationship between the metaphysical interpretation of nature and self-transcendence, many scholars have given attention to the theoretical issue: What is more important? Scholars such as Martine Buber and Joseph Urbas both discuss this issue by focusing attention on Daoism and Emerson, respectively. Martine Buber (Martine Buber 1991) gives the earlier interpretation of Daoism and argues that ethics and personal character play an important role in Daoism. Joseph Urbas (Urbas 2021) discussed Richard Rorty's research on the distinction between pre- and post-Kantian ethics and his claim that philosophy's primary subject is life and the quest for wisdom. Then, he argues that Emerson's metaphysis is only the guarantee for living a good life. In this part, I will examine the difference between Emerson and Zhuang Zi in this pursuit of self-transcendence towards nature. I will focus on two questions: (1) How do Emerson and Zhuang Zi's metaphysical interpretation of nature influence their understanding of the self? (2) Why should we transcend ourselves to nature?

3.1. True Self: Soul and Xing

The metaphysical interpretation of the concept of nature by Emerson and Zhuang Zi has a direct influence on their understanding of the self. They both think that our self is derived from the ultimate reality, so they are all related to nature. The two concepts that can better help us understand their conception of the self are soul and xing. In the following, I will examine these two concepts from the two key concepts I use when I discuss their interpretation of nature: power and purpose.

For Emerson, the soul can better represent our true self. Our soul is derived from Oversoul. "This Universal Soul, he calls Reason: it is not mind, or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men." (Emerson 1983, p. 21). By Universal Soul, Emerson refers to the efficient nature (God, Reason, Spiritual Law, and Supreme Nature). Emerson's account of the soul is well expressed in the following passage: "All goes to show that the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but is a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the

intellect and the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie,—an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed…… When it breathes through his intellect it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through affection, it is love." (Emerson 1983, pp. 386–87). From the above, we can find that Emerson's concept of soul includes three parts. (1) Intellect. By intellect, Emerson refers to scientific cognition which can help us better find the intrinsic likeness between remote things and discover the spiritual principles that ground the likeness. It is void of any affection. (2) Will. Emerson's concept of will is related to choice and virtue. For him, when we choose to surrender to God and let God guide our everyday life, we will have virtue. For Emerson, virtue represents the true self of men. "In a virtuous action, I properly am; in a virtuous act, I add to the world." (Urbas 2021, p. 109). (3) Affections of Love. The love is not directed to concrete persons or places but rather to spiritual principles. All the three abovementioned elements of the soul are interrelated with power. For the intellect, the power lies in transformation. When our intellect grows, it will transform into other states which can help us better detect the truth. Will is related to virtue in the sense that when we surrender ourselves to the truth of God, we will develop power. However, if we stick to our willful choice without worshiping God, then our power will be weakened. For Emerson, our understanding and virtue are directed by the ultimate purpose which lies in God. Since our soul is from God, we are already equipped with values from God. These values, as the ultimate purpose, will direct our cognition and action. What is, then, the relationship between the soul and the faculties of the mind (intellect, will, and love)? For Emerson, our soul can ignite all the faculties of the mind. It is not the Kantian sense of understanding, but it is the "the first thought" of human beings. It is the love of beauty and goodness.

In contrast, for Zhuang Zi, our true self is derived from the *Dao*. One dialogue in Zhuang Zi can better address this derivative relationship. This dialogue happens between Zhuang Zi and Huizi. Zhuang Zi argues that "The *Course* gives him this appearance, Heaven gives him this physical form, and he doesn't allow likes and dislikes to damage him internally." (Zhuang 2009, p. 38). From this passage, we can find that for Zhuang Zi, the ultimate reality of *Dao* gives us physical form, and when we have physical form, we are already human beings. Zhuang Xi often uses *xing* (inborn nature) to express our true self. *Xing* includes three elements, which are embodied cognition, virtue, and tranquility. (1) Embodied cognition. Zhuang Zi's understanding of cognition is different from Emerson's, but also shares similarities with him. For Zhuang Zi, our cognition is deeply dependent on the body. "The consciousness of living creatures depends on their breath. It is not Heaven's fault if it becomes depleted. Heaven blows through them day and night without cease, but human beings see to it that all their openings are blocked off. Only when you reopen yourself all the way back down to the placenta can your mind wander in the Heavenly." (Zhuang 2009, p. 113). For Zhuang Zi, our body is made up of vital energy. Within vital energy, there are two opposing parts: *yin and yang*. When the interaction of *yin* and *yang* goes smoothly, we will develop intuition, which can better help us connect with the ultimate reality, *Dao*. However, for Emerson, our intellect is derived from the metaphysical sense of intellect which is also termed as God. Although our intellect needs the interaction of the mind with material nature to gain knowledge of God, it is not dependent on the bodily power of human beings, which is triggered by the interaction of *Yin* and *Yang* as Zhuang Zi understands. (2) Virtue. By virtue, Zhuang Zi refers to the power from our embodied cognition. Emerson stresses that when we surrender ourselves to God, we will develop virtue. For Zhuang Zi, we will develop power when we do not allow the purposeful pursuit of any kinds of values to influence our minds. We do not need to choose to surrender ourselves to God since choice itself contains purpose. Zhuang Zi stresses forgetting all kinds of purposeful pursuits. (3) Tranquility. Zhuang Zi does not mention the love of *Dao*; rather, he points out that when we unite with *Dao*, we will achieve a state of tranquility.

What is, then, the relationship among *self-so* (nature), *xing*, and power? The following two passages from Zhuang Zi can help us better answer the question. "The Course is the

full array of Virtuosities. The life process is Virtuosity shining forth. The inborn nature is the concrete material of the life process. The motion of inborn nature is a kind of activity, but when activity becomes deliberate and artificial, it can be called the loss of inborn nature." (Zhuang 2009, p. 102); "They unify their inborn nature, nourish their vital energy, and merge their virtuosities, thereby opening into the place from which all beings are created. Someone like this keeps the Heavenly in him intact and the spirit in him free of gaps, so there is nowhere through which mere beings can get at him." For Zhuang Zi, when we follow the *Dao*'s way, which is self-so without deliberative schemes, plans, or artificial actions, we will keep our *xing* (inborn nature). When we maintain our inborn nature, our psychophysical energy will be active, which will ignite our power of the mind.

3.2. Self-Transcendence: Romantic Triad and Unity

Emerson and Zhuang Zi both stress self-transcendence to achieve unity with the highest reality. The reason is that we have a false self which is opposed to the true self. The false self tends to weaken our power and degrade human beings. We become strong when we establish the unity with the highest reality. For Emerson, the unity lies in the relationship among human beings, nature, and God, which can be termed as the romantic triad. This is a term I borrow from Samantha C. Harvey's expression in characterizing the relationship among spirit, humanity, and nature in her book titled *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson and Nature* (Harvey 2013). "The romantic triad" is a better term for the expression of the new trinity, which is against the traditional trinity in Christianity. Spirit refers to the ultimate reality, which is often termed as God. But for Emerson, God is not a Christian sense of God. He gave a strong criticism towards Christianity and its defenders. For him, "They magnify inspiration, miracles, mediatorship, the trinity, baptism, the eucharist." (Cabot 1887, p. 306). Emerson gives us a new interpretation of the Christian God after making detailed comments on the traditional understanding of the Christian God in James Elliot Cabot's *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. I will quote the passages below. "I deny personality to God because it is too little, not too much. Life, personal life, is faint and cold to the energy of God. For Reason and Love and Beauty, or that which is all these,-it is the life of life, the reason of reason, the love of love."; "Here is the truth. They do not and will not perceive that it is to distrust the deity of truth, its invincible beauty, to do God a high dishonor, so to depict Him." (Cabot 1887, p. 341). From the above three passages, we can find that for Emerson, the traditional understanding of God by believers is characterized by the following features of God: (1) God has personality; (2) God provides miracles to show his truth; (3) God sends his messenger, Christ, to convey himself to human beings. Christ is a divine being. The new interpretation of God by Emerson has three features: (1) God is conscious in the sense that it is a combination of truth, goodness, and beauty. These values are eternal life-giving power; (2) God does not use miracles to show truth. Rather, God uses visible objects to demonstrate God's truth, which is also beautiful and good. (3) Christ is not divinity. The divinity lies in human beings' "infinitude of man's nature". (Cabot 1887, p. 312). For Emerson, human beings can finally know the ultimate reality via the medium of material nature. Zhuang Zi stresses the unity between human beings and *Dao*. For Zhuang Zi, *Dao* can be known without the medium of material nature. We can have direct encounters with *Dao* when our mind is in a state of emptiness. In this part, I will discuss the difference between the trinity and unity from the following three perspectives: (1) Emerson and Zhuang Zi's understanding of the false self; (2) the status of material nature; and (3) the spiritual state of self-transcendence.

First, Emerson and Zhuang Zi hold the same view that there is a false self that needs to be transcended to achieve an authentic self. However, they differ in their understanding of the false self. For Emerson, the false self lies in the departure from efficient nature (God). The false self is characterized by other-reliance rather than a reliance on God. One type of false self which is related to other-reliance is imitation. Emerson strongly criticizes imitation and thinks it is "the vice of overcivilized communities" and "a servile copying of what is capricious as if it were permanent forms of nature." (Branch and Mohs 2017,

p. 63). For Emerson, there is no permanent standard for us to follow that is provided by human civilization. All of the standards are always changing. Nature can give us the standard. However, the process of understanding nature's standards is always evolving. The final purpose is towards the truth, good, and beauty. Good is very important compared with the other two elements. However, in terms of what constitutes good, our process of understanding will never end.

By other reliance, Emerson refers to reliance on traditional values, customs, or wealth to define oneself. In contrast, Zhuang Zi's conception of the false self mainly refers to the self which is shaped by the purposeful pursuit of external goods, which include traditional values, fame, wealth, and so on. For him, if we want to achieve self-transcendence, we must transcend the false self. He writes, "So the conduct of the Great man harms no one, but he places no special value on humanity and kindness. His actions are not motivated by profit, but he does not despise those who slavishly subordinate themselves to it. He does not fight over wealth, but he places no special value on yielding and refusing it……" (Zhuang 2009, p. 70). For Zhuang Zi, we should do things effortlessly in the sense that we are not motivated by any value which we judge to be good. Rather, we do things spontaneously without deliberate plans.

Second, for both Emerson and Zhuang Zi, material nature is very important. Although they interpret the importance differently, they both treat material nature as reality rather than as an illusion as Plato had envisioned. This is a very important point I would like to stress because it is the deeper reason why Emerson and Zhuang Zi pursue spirituality in nature rather than other objects which are related to persons. Emerson criticizes idealism's conception of nature. He says, "Idealism acquaints us with the total disparity between the evidence of our own being, and the evidence of the world's being. The one is perfect; the other, incapable of assurance; the mind is a part of the nature of things; the world is a divine dream, from which we may presently awake to the glories and certainties of day. Idealism is a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry" (Branch and Mohs 2017, p. 103).

For Emerson, nature is reality instead of illusion. There is no separation between God and material nature. Material nature is the incarnation and revelation of God. We can know God through knowing about material nature. Emerson thinks that we can use scientific knowledge to interpret nature, which can bring us to truth. If we make some comparisons with Socrates' pursuit of truth, we will gain a deeper understanding of the importance of treating material nature as reality. Socrates did not pay much attention to material nature, since for him, material nature could not guide him to find knowledge and truth. Knowledge and truth are gained via dialectical reasoning and contemplation of form for Socrates. Eugene C. Hargrove (Eugene C. Hargrove 1989, p. 27) discussed in detail why Plato and Socrates show contemplation towards physical nature in his Foundations of Environmental Ethics. His research can help us better understand why many Western scholars such as Plato and Descartes did not find spirituality in nature as Emerson and Zhuang Zi. For Zhuang Zi, material nature is treated as reality since the vital energy of which nature is made is permanent. He does not try to justify that vital energy exists, but rather takes it for granted. Although individual things will come and go, the vital energy will never disappear. It is always in a process of flow and transformation. One question may arise here: how do Emerson and Zhuang Zi prove that material nature really exists rather than it being an illusion? Emerson uses moral sentiment to justify his belief that the ultimate reality which is God exists. We can feel the power from them. Material nature is the effect of God, and so it must be reality. For Emerson, God "announces" its existence via material nature. Zhuang Zi does not use belief to prove that material nature exists. Instead, he takes it as a given reality.

Material nature in Zhuang Zi is not made up of vital energy and is always in a process of flowing. For him, we can never know what the material objects are since they are always changing. He expresses this point in the chapter of The Great Source as Teacher, "For our understanding can be in the right only by virtue of a relation of dependence on something,

and what it depends on is always peculiarly unfixed." (Zhuang 2009, p. 39). For Zhuang Zi, we can never know the objective truth in material nature since it is always changing. Material nature is not the object of intellect as Emerson understands, but it is a lifeworld for human beings. It is a living place for human beings to experience the *Dao* through working on the land. For Zhuang Zi, our nature is related to working on the land to obtain food and clothes.

Third, Emerson and Zhuang use a completely different term to describe our highest spiritual state of self-transcendence. Emerson stresses the sublime while Zhuang Zi focuses on tranquility. Emerson writes, "Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever, the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable. It inspires awe and astonishment." (Emerson 1983, p. 388). From this quote, we find that Emerson stresses the feeling of awe when we become united with God. In contrast, Zhuang Zi focuses on the feeling of tranquility. This point can be seen in the following passage, "But the vital energy is an emptiness, a waiting for the presence of beings. The Course alone is what gathers in this emptiness. And it is this emptiness that is the fasting of the mind." (Zhuang 2009, p. 27). For Zhuang Zi, when we become united with the *Dao*, the state of our mind is empty, which is accompanied by tranquility.

4. Place: Wilderness versus Agricultural Land

Wilderness and agricultural land are two types of physical landscapes, and their continuance of existence to a large degree depends on conservation, which is deeply influenced by policies and laws. Behind the conservation policies and laws, valuing these landscapes as places plays an important role. In this paper, I will not discuss conservation issues related to wilderness or agricultural land. I will focus on how wilderness and agricultural land are valued as places by Emerson and Zhuang Zi.

Philosophers and humanistic geographers have given a lot of attention to the concept of place. The geographer Yifu Duan stresses moral and aesthetic engagement with sites and locations. Jeff Malpas wrote a book on Heidegger and the Thinking of Place. He points out that the idea of place is the key to understanding human beings. Human beings live in a place, and it is a given reality that shapes who we are (Malpas 2012, pp. 3–4). Paul B. Thompson, in his book on agrarian culture and environmental ethics, also discusses the concept of place. He writes, "Place is thus dependent on the cognitive processes of subjects. Place exists only in the mind, in the experiences and practices of perceiving or discoursing subjects. It is the secondhand copy of actual spatial locations mediated by cognitive or linguistic processes." (Paul B. Thompson 2010, p. 132) For Thompson, place is different from physical space as place has been re-created via our cognitive or linguistic processes. Although different scholars take a different approach to the study of place, they share a similar view on the interpretation of place: (1) Places are not the physical locations but are deeply interconnected with people's aesthetic appreciation of place. (2) The concept of place contains the embodied experience of human beings. Before I talk about place, I must introduce the two important landscapes, which are wilderness and agricultural land, from the perspective of environmental history. Then, I will discuss their aesthetic appreciation of wilderness and agricultural land from two perspectives of place.

4.1. Landscapes: Wilderness and Agricultural Land

Wilderness and agricultural land are different landscapes of material nature. Wilderness is more aesthetically valued and conserved in America than in China. There is a deeper historical reason for it.

Nash's book titled *Wilderness and the American mind* (Roderick Frazier Nash 2001) can give us a very comprehensive understanding of the concept of wilderness. He points out that wilderness is a cultural concept that is unique to American culture. Wilderness at first is not treated as a place, which is a combination of aesthetics and ethical concerns about it. People's understanding of wilderness is deeply influenced by Christianity and Locke's the-

ory of private property. Negative appreciation of wilderness is also influenced by the hardships that Americans experienced when first settling into the frontier. However, American transcendentalists, especially Emerson and Thoreau, transformed people's understanding and appreciation of wilderness. The 1964 American wilderness law is partly due to their contribution. The concept of wilderness has become a key concept in the conservation field. "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Wilderness is listed as category 1b of protected areas. IUCN defines a protected area as "a clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values" and wilderness areas as "Usually large unmodified or slightly modified areas, retaining their natural character and influence, without permanent or significant human habitation, protected and managed to preserve their natural condition." Emerson, in his work, does not provide any definition of wilderness; however, his transcendentalism promotes wilderness appreciations, which would eventually lead to its conservation.

In Chinese culture, the concept of wilderness has a very negative meaning. It is made up of two Chinese characters, huang and ye. According to the very old Chinese dictionary called Shuo wen Jie Zi, huang means the deserted land which is full of grass and ye means that it is outside the city. The Chinese expression for the landscapes of material nature includes mountains and waters, rivers, oceans, and agricultural land. However, in American culture, mountains, waters, rivers, and oceans, as long as they are less influenced by human civilization, will all belong to the wilderness. In China, wilderness mainly refers to deserted agricultural land. Since China is characterized by thousands of years of agrarian civilization, the agricultural lifestyle to a large degree shapes people's everyday aesthetics including aesthetic appreciation of four seasons, directions, and food. Professor Liu Chengji's (Chengji Liu 2018, pp. 109–17) article titled "Tian Xia (All things under Heavens)" gives an insightful remark on the importance of agriculture in Chinese nature aesthetics. For him, Chinese civilization originated from the Yellow River, where the agricultural lifestyle is easily carried out. From that place, an aesthetic appreciation of nature based on agricultural practice started to develop. The reason why Zhuang Zi treats plowing on agricultural land as an inborn human nature is deeply influenced by agrarian civilization in China. Wilderness has mostly been historically devalued in China by mainstream culture that is shaped by agrarian civilization. However, in the past ten years, some scholars in the field of landscape research started to pay attention to the concept of wilderness since China is conducting a giant project to create more national parks in China. Many places will be conserved via a system of national parks. Scholars such as Yang Rui and Cao Ye first raised the conception of wilderness in Chinese culture from the perspective of landscapes and conservation. They wrote an article to advocate that we should try to use the construction of national parks to preserve the vast wilderness areas which appear mostly in the western part of China. From a cultural perspective, wilderness itself is not aesthetically appreciated and valued by Chinese Confucianism and Daoism, so it will be very difficult for the general public to participate in the conservation of wilderness. In terms of the agricultural land, it also meets a lot of challenges. Since more people are moving into the cities, and there is a lot of agricultural land which is deserted and which wilderness has taken over. There is a new landscape which is a combination of agricultural land and wilderness. Should we conserve the agricultural land where there is a rich agrarian legacy, or the new wilderness? I will not try to answer this question in this paper since it requires knowledge from various disciplines. I only try to focus on why the agricultural land is treated as place.

4.2. Aesthetic Appreciation: Living in Harmony with Wilderness versus Living in Harmony with Agriculture

Both Emerson and Zhuang Zi express aesthetic appreciation for nature. The object of aesthetic appreciation lies in harmony. Emerson stresses the harmony between soul and matter in wilderness while Zhuang Zi stresses living in harmony with agriculture. Emerson appreciates wilderness more than he appreciates agricultural land. His interpretation of nature has greatly influenced American landscape artists' aesthetic appreciation of wilderness. Nicholas Guardiano's research (Guardiano 2016) can provide us with deeper insights. In contrast, Zhuang Zi's aesthetic appreciation of nature focuses more on agricultural land. In this part, I will explain why they focus on different forms of landscape.

Emerson appreciates material nature. In terms of material nature, there are different types of them which include cultivated land, such as gardens and agricultural lands, and pristine nature, such as wilderness. Emerson's understanding of material nature includes all of the above forms of nature. He thinks that all types of nature are beautiful. However, the beauty of wilderness is ranked first in beauty, and cultivated nature as a form of art is ranked second. He states that "Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result." (Emerson 1971–2013, 1:8). For Emerson, art refers to human beings' will to blend with original nature. However, they are a copy of the original nature, which is more beautiful. From this, we can find that many forms of cultivated nature which include houses, canals, or statues are still based on nature. They are beautiful only on a secondary level. He writes, "In the wilderness, I find something more clear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature." (Emerson 1983, p. 10). "Nature kills egotism, and conceit; deals strictly with us; and gives sanity; so that it was the practice of the Orientals, especially of the Persians, to let insane persons wander at their own will out of the towns, into the desert, and, it they liked, to associate with wild animals. In their belief, wild beasts, especially gazelles, collect around an insane person, and live with him on a friendly footing. The patient found something curative in that intercourse, by which he was quieted, and sometimes restored." (Branch and Mohs 2017, p. 202).

In contrast, Zhuang Zi's aesthetic appreciation of nature focuses not on harmony within material nature itself; rather, he focuses on the harmonious relationship between nature and human beings in agricultural land. In terms of harmony, I would like to explain it from three aspects. (1) It is the relationship between human beings and nature in life practices; (2) human beings follow nature in the sense that we do not use technologies to conquer nature, but rather carry out our inborn nature in everyday agricultural life practices. For Zhuang Zi, wilderness or agricultural land itself is not the object of aesthetic appreciation. If they do not form a relationship with human beings in everyday life, people tend to ignore them. For Zhuang Zi, if we follow the Dao's way, which is spontaneity, we will live in harmony with nature. "For the people too have their own constant inborn nature. To be clothed by their own weaving, fed by their own plowing-this is what is called their shared Virtuosity…. Thus, in the age of perfect Virtuosity their actions were solid and full but their gaze was distant and blank. For in those days, there were no paths or trails through the mountains, no boats or bridges over the ponds; all creatures lived together, merging their territory into one another. The birds and beasts clustered with each other, the grasses and trees grew unhampered. So one could tie a cord to a bird or beast and take a stroll with it or bend down a branch to peep into a bird's nest. Indeed, in those days of perfect virtuosity, the people lived together with the birds and beasts, bunched together with all things." (Zhuang 2009, p. 61). From this passage, we can find that Zhuang Zi treats agricultural land as a place for people to carry out their inborn nature, which is to work on farmland to make a living. They will not use technology to improve the efficiency of working but use primitive ways to work on the farm. Wilderness is also part of the living

place. Therefore, people usually will not explore wilderness for their own sake if it is not related to everyday life.

4.3. Bodily Experience in Place: Global versus Local

Emerson and Zhuang Zi both stress bodily experience in place. Emerson stresses the direct experience of wilderness while Zhuang Zi stresses living practices in nature such as working on the land to obtain food and clothing materials. The big difference is that for Emerson, we should not attach ourselves to the wilderness in a particular area; rather, all kinds of wilderness are the same. To him, "all places are alike" for in all appear that law and order which certify him of co-nature with his own constitution more than do the lineaments which resemble his own, which he sees in his own house. Having found his home in that which affirms itself to the cause of all, all his knowledge and moral growth go to domesticate him in every fact and event that transpires in nature. All places are alike to him for that which is with him constitutes place. He is, himself, place, and whatever is not with him in spirit is abroad and vagabond (Urbas 2021, p. 89). For Emerson, he will not attach to a certain place, although he has bodily experience in it such as walking and working. His strong love is not the material place, but rather it is the spiritual laws. His love for the wilderness is founded on his love for the spiritual laws. That is the reason why his sense of place is global. No matter where he goes, he is the home in the sense that he is deeply attached to the laws which reside in God. In contrast, Zhuang Zi stresses working on the land to maintain livelihood and it is also the ideal way of life. When people live in a certain place, their nature is intertwined with the place. When working on agricultural land, Zhuang Zi strongly objects to using technology to improve the efficiency; rather, he sticks to the traditional way of farming since we can experience Dao in this natural way instead of using deliberative minds to improve the efficiency of farming. For Zhuang Zi, working on land is not only to maintain our livelihood, but also the art of life.

5. Conclusions

In this article, we can find the deeper reasons why Emerson and Zhuang Zi both pursue self-transcendence towards nature rather than human beings. The keys lie in their different metaphysical interpretations of the concept of nature. Nature, in their works, is deeply related to the ultimate values of truth, good, and beauty. It is with these values that self-transcendence towards nature becomes possible. Their pursuit of spirituality in nature has a direct influence on their aesthetic appreciation of the material kinds of nature, which is the key to treating the different kinds of material nature as places. Blended with historical reasons, wilderness, as one type of landscape within material nature, is aesthetically appreciated and loved so it no longer exists as material nature but as a place. In contrast, agricultural land in Chinese culture is treated not only as a material thing that maintains our lives, but also as a place that is aesthetically appreciated and loved.

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Article

Beauty and Dao: The Transcendental Expressions of Nature from Emerson's Prose and the *Zhuangzi*

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Abstract: As an aesthetic resource in ancient China, the *Zhuangzi*'s description of Dao is similar to the American philosopher Emerson's experience of beauty, and both reveal that the essence of beauty lies in its inherent vitality, spiritual transcendence, and the unity of multidimensional connotations. Emerson defines beauty as the constitution of all things in the world and believes it to be an expression of the universe. The *Zhuangzi* proposes the thought of tiandi damei 天地大美 (lit. Great Beauty of heaven and earth) as a manifestation of the function of the wordless Dao. Nature, intact from any human interference, becomes the common intermediary for Emerson and the *Zhuangzi* to elaborate on the connotations of beauty. The Emersonian definition of beauty originates from the philosophical implication of the world in ancient Greek, whereas the meaning of Great Beauty in the *Zhuangzi*, which embodies the worship of heaven in primitive religion, is very close to Emerson's definition of beauty. The pattern of mei 美 consisting of da 大 (lit. great, equivalent to Dao) and yang 羊 (lit. auspice) signifies the natural celestial phenomena predicting good or bad luck and can be seen as synonymous with Dao illuminated by Daoism. By describing such natural imagery as forest, time sequence, dawn, and wilderness, Emerson reveals the vastness, harmony, brightness, and tranquility of beauty, which not only delights the spirit but also brings the human soul back to its natural state and improves personality. Emerson's illumination of beauty conforms to those of Dao unraveled by the *Zhuangzi*. Despite the difference between the former's poetic linguistic feature and the latter's application of allegorical fables, both resort to visualized language to express internal aesthetic perceptions of the physical nature. Using the approaches of word tracing, textual comparison, and logical analysis, this article identifies the consistency in the original meanings of beauty in both Emerson's essays and the *Zhuangzi* first and then goes on to analyze the similarities between their descriptions of natural imagery, so as to hint at the commonality in their understanding of natural beauty and verify the significance of literary language in cross-cultural comparative research.

Keywords: beauty and Dao; *Zhuangzi*; Emerson; original meaning of words; imagery expression; perception of nature; thoughts interweaving; poetic language; essence of beauty

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1. Introduction

All beauty lies in perception and imagination (see Bernard Bosanquet 1985). Using natural scenery and phenomena as objects of observation to express the fleeting transcendent experience of the soul when facing nature is called natural aesthetics. On the platform of cross-cultural comparison, the classic works of Chinese Daoism and the essays of the American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson are objects of comparison that should never be ignored, thanks to their common focus on natural aesthetics.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), the American nineteenth-century thinker, writer and poet, stands in awe of nature, whose attitude is quite different from the Western scientific approach to transform and conquer nature. In 1836, his "little azure-coloured *Nature*" (Emerson 1983, p. 1128) was published, followed by his address *the Method of Nature*, and his essay *Nature*. Sailing home from Europe in 1833, he wrote the following words: "I

like my book about nature & wish I knew where & how I ought to live." (Emerson 1983, p. 1127). From Emerson's perspective, nature abounds in sacred enlightenment; therefore, human beings should communicate with nature face to face. Such an attitude to adore and respect nature is much in tune with the Chinese Daoist thoughts to advocate nature[1].

The *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi*[2] 庄子 are the representative Chinese Daoist classics. The *Laozi* proposes that "man follows the earth, earth follows the heaven, and heaven follows Dao 道, Dao should take its models from the nature[3] (*ziran* 自然 see The *Laozi, Chapter 25*)", while the *Zhuangzi* visualizes that a carefree person "could ride into the orbit of heaven and earth, and harness the changes of the six Qi[4] 气 to roam in the infinite without any obstacles" (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 9). In this sentence, heaven and earth and the six Qi are synonymous with nature. The verb "ride" means that the person entering the carefree realm has completely integrated with the nature being ridden. Nature, as a core Daoist category, is both a description and the representative outcome or intermediary of the functioning and transforming Dao of "purposeless behavior" (*wuwei* 无为). It is the Dao of nature elaborated on repeatedly by the Daoist school.

Since the late 1980s, the affinity of thoughts between Chinese Daoism and Emerson has drawn the attention of scholars from China and abroad. However, most of the current research focuses on the comparison between Emerson and the *Laozi* 老子, for example, the relationship between Emerson's Transcendentalism and Daoist philosophy, the similarities and differences between Dao and the Oversoul, with just a few papers touching on a philosophical exploration of their views on nature, aesthetics, and ecology (Yang and Yang 2014). There are scarce papers that conducted research by connecting the *Zhuangzi* with Emerson, and they mainly illuminate such issues as the pursuit of life (Wang 2009; Wang 2023), ecological ethics (Li 2014), the state of solitude (Coles 2023), imagery differentiation (Bai 2021), and the concept of nature (Jia 2022). What is indicated from these results is that scholars seem to have formed a clear consensus, i.e., Emerson was influenced by Laozi (Yang and Yang 2014), either absorbing Laozi's views or expanding Laozi's theory[5]. Emerson indeed expressed a certain degree of recognition of the oriental culture in 1844 when his meditations about nature were published, but he only mentioned Confucianism without referring to Daoism[6]. However, some scholars, such as Matthew Crippen, believe that Emerson may have read the French version of *Daodejing* 道德经 (see Crippen 2023). Therefore, it still must be further testified as to whether Emerson obtained access to the Chinese Daoist classics in his lifetime.

The 5000-character *Daodejing*, which "extends from cosmology to life, and from life to politics" (Chen 1992), uses short aphorisms to construct a theory of Dao with the aim of "governing the world" (Sima 1982, p. 3292) and is called by a historian of the Han Dynasty "the king's strategy to rule the country by sitting on the throne of the emperor, facing the south and giving orders to the ministers" (*junren nanmian zhishu* 君人南面之术)[7]. Despite Emerson's concerns about politics, he is more inclined toward spiritual experience in his essays on nature. The *Zhuangzi*, also a classic of Daoism, takes the elucidation of Laozi's Dao as the starting point (Sima 1982, p. 2143), elevates the human spirit from the real world to a high artistic level, and is closer to Emerson's idea of the "Oversoul". Even in the choice of expression, they seem to coincide. In Emerson's poetic prose work *Nature*, "Beauty" is the title of the third chapter, while in "Knowinghood Journeyed North" (*zhibeiyou* 知北游) of the *Zhuangzi*, "the great beauty of heaven and earth" (*tiandi damei* 天地大美) is put forth. In *Wanderings on the Dao and Zen* (*manshu zhuangchan* 漫述庄禅), the aesthetician Li Zehou 李泽厚 asserts: "the thinking of the *Zhuangzi* is oriented toward aesthetics" (see Li 1985).

The beauty of nature is the focal point of both Emerson's philosophical contemplation and the *Zhuangzi*'s wisdom, thereby becoming the entry point for conducting research on the commonalities of both cultures. This article is firstly aimed at revealing similar directions in the original connotations of both Emerson's beauty and the Chinese character mei (美 lit. beauty), so as to dig out the etymological foundations of such a phenomenon of spiritual commonality using the approaches of tracing and discriminating words' meanings. The third part of this article goes into the depth of the text and seeks out similar descrip-

tions of the experience of nature in both classics, thereby summarizing their commonalities in the perceptions of nature. The fourth part rises to a theoretical level to elaborate on the closeness of the aesthetic concepts in both texts.

2. The Common Starting Point for Discussion: The Original Meaning of Beauty

In the Introduction of *Nature*, Emerson asks "why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe ?" (Emerson 1983, p. 7). This principle also runs through his choice of terminology to illuminate his thoughts. He divides the composition of the world into four categories: commodity, beauty, language, and discipline. Beauty, as the expression of a "useless thing" opposite to a commodity, or a "useful thing", has multiple meanings in English. To clarify whether the meaning of beauty in Emerson's thoughts is the same as that of the "Great Beauty" (*damei* 大美) in the *Zhuangzi*, it is necessary to trace the original meaning of this word in both Emerson's works and the Chinese language.

2.1. The "Constitution of World" and the Meaning of Beauty in Emerson's "Nature"

At the beginning of the third chapter of *Nature*, Emerson wrote: "The ancient Greeks called the world κόσμος, beauty. Such is the constitution of all things, or such the plastic power of the human eye" (Emerson 1983, p. 14). In Emerson's view, "beauty" is related to the essence of the world, on the one hand, and human sensory experience on the other hand. The relationship between the Greek "κόσμος" and the English "beauty" is not the correspondence of linguistic meaning, but it is the ideological connection in the understanding of "world ontology". The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (circa 544B.C.–483B.C.) once explained: "The real world exists in the balance adjustment of the tendency of confrontation. Behind the hostile struggle, there is harmony or coordination according to various scales. This is the world" (Russell 1992). For the ancient Greeks, the constant aggression among various forms of material is due to a lack of balance and is attributed to the category of "injustice". Therefore, it becomes a universal mission for them to find stable order from a chaotic or accidental series of things, which serves as the very starting point of ancient Greek philosophy and science. Harmony or coordination within the opposed forces is the constitution of all things from which the world is born and to which it ultimately belongs. Emerson's "beauty" is exactly this universal principle of the unity of opposites. He said: "beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe", while "philosophically considered, the universe is composed of nature and soul" (Emerson 1983, pp. 8, 19). The so-called "plastic power of human eye" is the discovery of the existence and exhibition of beauty, which is inseparable from the participation of human spirit and wisdom. In the third chapter of *Nature*, Emerson defines the features of beauty in three levels from low to high: "First, the simple perception of natural forms is a delight". "Second, the presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element is essential to its perfection". "Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue". Third, beauty "becomes an object of the intellect". It works through the involvement of human will (Emerson 1983, pp. 14–19). That is to say, in the procedure of appreciating nature, the human spirit undergoes a gradual elevation from a simple feeling of pleasure to the highest domain of beauty where mind integrates with natural beauty and presents beauty without any thinking activity. This is what Emerson calls "artistic creation", corresponding to "obtaining Dao" (*dedao* 得道) in the *Zhuangzi*.

2.2. The Religious Connotation of "Beauty" as a Celestial Phenomenon

Because of the pictographic origins of Chinese characters, the initial meaning of a character is often determined by its pattern. Therefore, to explore the original meaning of mei 美, we trace it back to the dictionary *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* 说文解字, which explains characters based on their patterns, written by Xu Shen 许慎 (circa 58/30AC.–circa 147/121AC.), who was known as the "word-saint" in the Eastern Han Dynasty. Mei 美 is assigned to the "yang-bu" 羊部[8] (羊 lit. ram) of Volume IV: "'Mei' means 'gan' 甘 (lit. delicious), consisting of 'yang' 羊 and 'da' 大 (lit. great). Ram belongs to one of the six kinds of livestock that

provide food. The meaning of mei is the same with that of 'shan' 善 (lit. good)" (Xu 1963, p. 78). Xu Shen's explanation of *mei* 美 as being delicious is not yet universally accepted by modern people. Some paleographers dismiss the seal characters (*zhuanti* 篆体) that Xu Shen based his studies on as having deviated from their original patterns, thereby turning to the oracle bone inscription of *mei* and explaining it as "a great personage (*daren* 大人) or dancer with a feather-decorated headwear" (Kang 1979; Li 2005). The "great personage" is interpreted by Li Zehou 李泽厚 and Liu Gangji 刘纲纪 from the culturology perspective as "the authoritative wizard or chieftain in charge of all the witchcraft activities in the primitive society" (Li and Liu 1984). This is actually a materialist interpretation of *mei*'s original meaning from a physical point of view. The witchard (*wu* 巫), in essence, serves as the intermediary between the deity and humanity and can therefore be seen as the incarnation of the deity in the mundane world, whose image fundamentally symbolizes the imagery of the deity. Xu Shen's annotation obviously bears the ambiguous color of ancient Chinese thinking, which is far from a scientific conceptual definition. But he provided three approaches to understanding "mei" 美: first, "mei" 美 is related to "gan" 甘; second, "yang" 羊 and "da" 大 are the constituents of "mei" 美; and third, "mei" 美 and "shan" 善 are synonymous. All these indicate that the meanings of the five characters "mei" 美, "gan" 甘, "yang" 羊, "da" 大, and "shan" 善 are related to each other in a certain way.

The "gan-bu" 甘部 (甘 lit. delicious) of Volume V in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* states that "'gan'甘, means 'mei' 美. Its pattern looks like having 'yi' 一 (lit. 'one') in the 'kou' 口 (lit. mouth), while 'yi' 一means Dao 道. The meanings of all words with the 'gan-bu' 甘部 are related to meaning of 'gan' 甘" (Xu 1963, p. 100). Xu Shen believes that "mei" 美 and "gan" 甘 are synonymous. The "yi" 一 in the "kou" 口, represented by the pattern of "gan" 甘, is a symbol of Dao 道. Xu Shen describes Dao 道, an important concept of Daoism, in his own words: "At the beginning of time and space, the Dao stood in Oneness, created and divided the heaven and the earth, then transformed into all things" (Xu 1963, p. 7). Xu Shen's explanation of "mei" 美borrows certain ideas from Daoism, i.e., anything bearing Dao 道 has the attribute of "gan" 甘 or "mei" 美. The invisible and traceless Dao 道 can only be tasted or experienced by individuals themselves, which thus suggests that "mei" 美 possesses psychological attributes. However, people rely on their common sense and regard what is in the mouth as edibles that can stimulate the palate, thus causing the meaning of "mei" 美 to deviate from the track of Dao 道 and embark on the road of "taste". The meaning of "mei" as a delicacy belongs to the sensory dimension, which coincides with Emerson's so-called "simple delight".

The lower part of the Chinese character "mei" 美 is "da" 大 (lit. "great"). The explanation of "da-bu" 大部 in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* is: "The heaven is great (*da* 大), the earth is great (*da* 大), and the human is also great (*da* 大). The pattern of character 'da' 大 is like a human being whose limbs are all stretched out" (Xu 1963, p. 213). Xu Shen's comment on "da" 大 comes from the *Laozi*. In Chapter 25 of the *Daodejing* 道德经 (i.e., *Laozi*), edited by Fu Yi 傅奕 (555?–639) of the Tang Dynasty, it is said that: "There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. … I do not know its infant name and I give it the designation of the Dao. Making a further effort to give it an adult name I would call it The Great. … Therefore the Dao is great; Heaven is great; Earth is great; and the human too is great." In some versions, "human" is converted into a "king" (Liu 2006, pp. 311–12). Both "da" 大 and Dao 道 refer to the same entity, i.e., the creator of all things, overlapping with what "yi" 一 is directed at.

The upper part of the Chinese character "mei" 美 is "yang" 羊 (lit. "ram"). The *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* interpretation is that "yang means auspice (*xiang* 祥). Its pattern '𦍌', looks like an animal with horns on its head and feet like a tail. Confucius said: 'The character patterns of both 'niu' 牛 (lit. cattle) and 'yang' 羊 (lit. ram) are the respective imitations of the shape of the animals. The meaning of all Chinese characters containing the component of 'yang' 羊 is related to its meaning" (Xu 1963, p. 78). The oracle bone inscription "yang" 羊 is considered to be "the delineation of the ram's face" (Yu 1999). The pictographic character "yang" 羊 originally meant auspice (*xiang* 祥). The left half of "xiang" 祥, i.e., "礻",

is a variant of the Chinese character "shi" 示 (lit. Earth God), while "shi" 示 is "to show good or bad omens to people" (Xu 1963, p. 7). In this respect, "yang" 羊 has implications in relation to the natural "way of heaven" (*tiandao* 天道). However, Xu Shen also mentions "yang" 羊 elsewhere as one of the six kinds of livestock that provide food, so as to orient "yang" 羊 toward the direction of meaning taste. As a result, "yang" 羊 seems to have two layers of meaning, whose inner connection is difficult to sort out. An attempt to explain the inner connection finds the answer in the ancient Chinese ideology of "the way of heaven" (*tiandao* 天道), i.e., good or bad omens result from the mutual movement of two categories of Qi 气 between heaven and earth. There are sufficient statements on this issue in the *Zhuangzi*, e.g., "Knowinghood Journeyed North" (*zhibeiyou* 知北游) states that: "Everything in the world is attributed to the same 'qi' 气" (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 422); in "Zeyang" 则阳, it is written: "'Yin' 阴 and 'Yang' 阳 are the greatest 'Qi' 气. … Yin 阴 and Yang 阳 shine on each other, cover each other and regulate each other. The four seasons replace each other, give birth to each other and destroy each other … Safety and danger replace each other, disaster and happiness depend on each other" (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 515); "Wandering Far and Unfettered" (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遥游) describes a bird named Peng 鹏 that "climbs ninety thousand miles in a spiraling ascent that twists like a ram's horn" (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 7). Peng 鹏 climbs ninety thousand miles by taking advantage of the extremely positive atmosphere (*yangqi* 阳气) in June of the Chinese lunar calendar, while "a spiraling ascent that twists like a ram's horn" is a depiction of the image of the air intertwining and rising upward, circling intensely (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 7). As a scholar of the Confucianist classics in the Eastern Han Dynasty, Xu Shen compiled *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* for the purpose of interpreting the Confucianist classics "that should be applied to the practice of social government" (*jingshizhiyong* 经世致用). Considering this context, his explanation of the meanings of "yang" 羊 and "mei" 美 obviously follow double paths: a metaphysical path and a physical path. The interpretation of "mei" 美 as the natural way of heaven conforms with ancient Chinese ideology, whereas the association between "mei" 美 and the delicacy of mutton corresponds with the practices of the mundane ritual regulations. What is more, such an interpretation of "mei" 美 that resorts to intangible taste is undoubtedly closer to the essence of "mei" 美 than turning to a visible entity, while the metaphysical sense of "mei" 美 as good or bad omens cannot work without the involvement of human consciousness.

As for "shan" 善 (lit. good), as a token of virtue, it is also related to Dao 道. In "The Great Master" (*dazongshi* 大宗师), it is put in this way: "The huge block of earth bears my physical form, labors me with life, eases me with old age, rests me with death. Thus to make my life is something good and to make my death is also something good." (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 153). This statement tries to reveal that both naissance and the death of life are representatives of the goodness of the great Dao 道. The ancients predict good or bad luck so as to avoid bad luck. Therefore, it is always good to be told in advance, no matter whether the omen is good or bad. The dual connotations of good and evil in xiang 祥 overlap with those of "shan" 善 (Xu 1963, p. 7). The three characters "shan" 善, "mei" 美, "xiang" 祥 have in common the "yang" 羊 component symbolizing "celestial phenomena" (*tianxiang* 天象), thereby sharing the connotations of both beauty and goodness. In this respect, "mei" 美 entails the implications of virtue.

2.3. The Unity of Beauty and Dao

Emerson's philosophical concept of "beauty" has its corresponding designations in the *Zhuangzi*, i.e., "the great beauty" (*damei* 大美, see *zhibeiyou* 知北游), "the ultimate beauty" (*zhimei* 至美, see *tianzifang* 田子方), or "the beauty of heaven and earth" (*tiandi zhimei* 天地之美, see *tianxia* 天下), all of which are directly related to the core category of Dao 道. Liu Shaojin 刘绍谨 makes the following comment in *Zhuangzi and Chinese Aesthetics*: "The aesthetic significance of the *Zhuangzi* does not lie in its theoretical summations focusing on beauty and art as targets, but in the fact that when it comes to elaborations on Dao 道, its experience and realm of Dao just coincide with the aesthetic experience and realm of

art" (see Liu 2007, preface). Dao 道 and mei 美 with their intrinsic attributes, can only be perceived and understood by the human mind, which is what Emerson expresses as "the plastic power of the human eye" (Emerson 1983, p. 7). The great beauty of heaven and earth, i.e., the beauty of the functioning and transforming of way of heaven and earth, is exactly the original implication of mei 美.

The formulation of "great beauty" (*damei* 大美) can be found in the fable of Zhi 知 (lit. knowinghood) inquiring about Dao 道 in "Knowinghood Journeyed North" (*zhibeiyou* 知北游). The Dao seeker Zhi 知 asks Wu Wei Wei 无为谓, who lives by the dark water, Kuang Qu 狂屈, who lives by the white water, and the Yellow Emperor 黄帝, who lives in the legendary imperial palace, about the techniques of knowing Dao, settling in Dao, and obtaining Dao. Wu Wei Wei does not know how to express it; Kuang Qu wants to speak but stops; and the Yellow Emperor talks a lot, but in the end, he believes that the silent Wu Wei Wei and Kuang Qu are masters of Dao. After hearing the words of the Yellow Emperor, Kuang Qu praises the Yellow Emperor for his true understanding of Dao. In this story, the three people who are asked about Dao together complete the description of Dao's attributes in an indirect way. Using a reverse narrative paradigm, the fable conveys a philosophical notion that the essence of Dao lies in purposeless behavior (*wuwei* 无为). This paradox of "not doing but being able to achieve" is similar to the eternal changes in nature and also similar to Emerson's "the constitution of the world", which the *Zhuangzi* calls "Great Beauty". Therefore, the following text then goes further to explain that "there is great beauty in heaven and earth without expressing, there is the clear rule in four seasons without discussing, and there is the reason in all things without saying. The sage traces back to the beauty of heaven and earth and thereby reaches the truth of all things. Thus it is that the Ultimate Person (*zhiren* 至人) does not take purposeful actions, the Great Sage (*dasheng* 大圣) does not plan things: that is to say, they merely cast their gaze over heaven and earth" (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 422). The so-called "gaze over heaven and earth" is to observe the functioning and transforming state of the way of heaven and earth, similar to what Emerson said about "the plastic power of human eye" (Emerson 1983, p. 14), so as to understand the rules of change in all existence and yet conform to it. In the dialogue, Wu Wei Wei does not answer in order to adhere to the truth of Dao, conforming to how the "Ultimate Man" (*zhiren* 至人) comports himself; Kuang Qu, knowing and without answering, does not deviate from the track of Dao and can be regarded as the "Heaven-Man" (*tianren* 天人); and the Yellow Emperor, who answers but immediately denies what he has said, is shrewd in changing because not answering does not conform to secular principles, and is therefore the "sage" (*shengren* 圣人). The great beauty of heaven and earth is the natural rules of the universe, whose intrinsic essence is manifested as the circling alternation of four seasons and the transforming principle of the life and death of all things in the world. The realm, reached by the "Ultimate Man" and the "Great Sage" who have obtained access to Dao, similar to what Emerson said about "Genius", is a transcendence over the Emersonian useful sphere of "Commodity" and an achievement of the spiritual experience of useless "Beauty". This kind of experience is described in the *Zhuangzi* as "supreme beauty and happiness", which finds a similar expression of "enchantment" in Emerson's work. This layer of sense of mei 美 originates from its original meaning and echoes Emerson's delineation of beauty.

3. The Similar Selection of Natural Aesthetic Imagery

Since beauty is an expression of the universe, nature, as an important part of the universe, has become the same writing object in the Zhuangzi School and Emerson. The *Zhuangzi* explains the inner ideas of the beauty of heaven and earth using fables; Emerson's *Nature* uses poetic descriptions of nature to express the soul's narrative about beauty. Despite the distinctions in language and the expressive approach, the ideological essence revealed between the lines shows amazing similarities. Next, we will try to differentiate and analyze several natural images that are involved in both the *Zhuangzi*'s and Emerson's *Nature*.

3.1. The Spiritual Awakening Facing the Vast Beauty of Forests and Seas

Emerson said, in the first chapter of his book *Nature*, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith …… I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty." (Emerson 1983, p. 10). The "uncontained and immortal beauty" is his inspiration from the natural jungle. In the chapter "Beauty", Emerson made a further confession: "Nature stretches out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness." (Emerson 1983, p. 17). It can be seen that the "faith" he has regained is the admiration of the "great immortal" beauty, that is, the laws of the universe; the "reason" he has retrieved is the ideas "as grand and open as heaven and earth". Emerson deeply realized that "nature is a sea of forms radically alike and even unique. A leaf, a sun-beam, a landscape, the ocean, make an analogous impression on the mind. What is common to them all,—that perfectness and harmony, is beauty. The standard of beauty is the entire circuit of natural forms,—the totality of nature." (Emerson 1983, p. 18). Here, the sea is a metaphor. Its vastness and permanence symbolize the immensity and immortality of nature; its inclusiveness of absorbing all rivers signifies the beauty of "perfection and harmony" in various natural forms such as leaves, sunshine, scenery, etc. When people are integrated into nature, it seems as if their spirit and thoughts are enlarged to the breadth and profundity of the universe.

A similar experience of the beauty of vastness also appears in the fable of the *Zhuangzi*. The chapter "Autumn Waters" (*qiushui* 秋水) states:

> The autumn floods arrived on time, and numerous rivers were pouring into the Yellow River. The expanse of its unobstructed flow was so great that a horse on the other bank could not be distinguished from a cow. The River God Hebo 河伯 was overjoyed, delighting in his own powers, believing all the world's beauty now to be encompassed within himself. Flowing eastward, he arrived at the Northern Sea. Casting his gaze toward the east, he saw no end to the waters. It was then that he began to turn his face around, swirling into the vast and boundless sea, and sighed to the sea god Ruo (*beihairuo* 北海若): "There is a saying in the outlands: 'He who hears the Dao a mere hundred times believes no one can compare with him.' This describes me perfectly. When I first heard that there are those who belittle the erudition of Confucius and the righteousness of Boyi 伯夷, I didn't believe it. But now I have seen your vastness with my own eyes. If had never come here to your gate, I might have become a laughingstock to the masters of well-versed Dao (*dafang* 大方)! (Guo and Cheng 1998, pp. 328–29)

In this story, the River God, the incarnation of the Yellow River, has absorbed the water of many rivers in the Yellow River basin in the rainy season, so that the water level rises sharply, the flow is full, and there is a vast expanse of water between the banks. Looking from afar across the water, the islands are remote, and the horses and cows are indistinguishable. At this moment, the River God becomes complacent, thinking himself to be embracing "all the world's beauty". However, when he continues to travel eastward into the Northern Sea and witnesses the boundless and magnificent sea, all of a sudden he becomes enlightened, realizing his own insignificance, and is deeply impressed by the imposing grandeur of the sea. The River God's psychological state of "seeing the ocean and then sighing" is the same as how Emerson feels when facing the swaying branches in the storm: "The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right." (Emerson 1983, p. 11). This sense of sublimity is attributed to the power of the storm and also the conveyance of the beauty of nature. In "Autumn Waters" (*qiushui* 秋水) of the *Zhuangzi*, the beauty of vastness of sublimity is symbolized by Ruo of the Northern Sea (*beihairuo* 北海若). Having marveled at the majesty and mystery of the Northern Sea, the River God comes to realize that because opposite concepts, such as largeness and smallness, many and few, wisdom and stupidity, beauty and ugliness, are restricted by certain space–time conditions, all things have their own limitations. So, by putting down his pride and transcending the

differentiation between "largeness and smallness", he begins to humbly consult Ruo of the Northern Sea about the way of survival between heaven and earth, embarking on his spiritual journey toward sublimity. Similar to the River God's experience of abandoning the differentiation between largeness and smallness, Emerson makes a similar statement in his essay collection *Nature*: "At the gates of the forest, the surprised man of the world is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish." (Emerson 1983, p. 541). This spirit of transcending mundane ideas and integrating with heaven and earth composes the tacit understanding of the two philosophers when facing nature.

3.2. The Praise for the Harmonious Beauty of Time Sequence and Season

The harmonious time sequence is the representation of the beauty of the universe. It is also the operating principle of Dao in the *Zhuangzi*. The elucidation of this principle in the *Zhuangzi* is often encompassed in the context of a fable and directly stated by the protagonist of the fable.

As mentioned above, in "Knowinghood Journeyed North" (*zhibeiyou* 知北游), right after the narration of Knowinghood (*zhi* 知) having journeyed north seeking Dao, appears the parallel sentence pattern of "heaven and earth containing great beauty but never saying, four seasons having clear law but not talking, and all things connoting reason but not expressing". Its purpose is to juxtapose "four seasons' clear law", "all things' reason", and "the beauty of heaven and earth", suggesting they are of identical implications. The "four seasons' clear law", namely, the natural time sequence, is one of the manifestations of beauty. The principle of the alteration of the four seasons is directly stated in summarizing sentences so that the concept of the "purposeless behavior" (*wu-wei* 无为) of Dao is illuminated. In "Gengsang Chu" 庚桑楚, as the practitioner of Laozi's Dao of "non purposeful behavior", GengSang Chu helps the common people of Wei Lei 畏垒 obtain an especially abundant harvest and thus wins honor as a "sage". The local people intend to pay tribute to him with ritual prayers, only to be turned down by him. Gengsang Chu's response is not understood by his disciple Nanrong Chu 南荣趎, so he explains to his disciple that: "When the Bright and Warm Qi 阳气of spring bursts forth, all the plants come to life. When the fruits of the earth get access to the Dark and Cold Qi of autumn, they all mature for harvest." (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 444). Gengsang Chu inspires his student with the phenological principle and shows that he has only complied with the guideline of "great beauty without speaking", i.e., the purposeless principle of Dao. There is a dialogue between the two ancient holy kings Yao 尧 and Shun 舜 in the chapter "Heaven's Way" (*tiandao* 天道), who discuss the way of the Heaven-King (*tianwang* 天王) to govern the world. Dissatisfied with Yao's 尧 approach of "purposive action" (*you-wei* 有为), Shun 舜 comments: "With the intrinsic virtuosity (*de* 德) of the Heavenly, even what is put forth is tranquil and still. The sun and moon shine down and the four seasons come and go, just as day and night have their regular sequence, just as the clouds drift along and then the rain comes forth." (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 274). The operation of the sun and moon, the four seasons, the day and night, and the wind and rain, following the natural time sequence, is attributed to the functioning and transforming Dao. However, Dao is tranquil as usual as if it has done nothing, indicating that it is "great beauty" to follow the natural norms and observe the governing principle of "purposeless behavior" (*wuwei* 无为). The fable emphasizes the importance of "purposeless behavior" by first stating, then negating, and then affirming. "Heaven-King" here refers to the king proficient in Dao, the ancestor of the Chinese nationality, who, together with Yao and Shun, the Chinese esteem as the ancient saint-kings. Since saint-kings oppose human interference and advocate natural principles such as beauty, let alone ordinary people.

Compared with the approaches of "expression by an agent" and "conceptual generalization" in the *Zhuangzi*, Emerson chooses a poetic description of the landscape. But what he describes is not the scenery belonging to any specific place or time, but the colorful natural scenery from morning to night and the annual circulation of seasons from winter to autumn.

In the chapter "Beauty", Emerson claims that nature deifies human beings "with a few and cheap elements", while the appreciation of the daily beauty from morning to night can "make the pomp of emperors ridiculous" (Emerson 1983, p. 15). He writes about dawn, sunrise, sunset, moonrise, noon, and evening, especially the charming dusk in winter:

> The western clouds divided and subdivided themselves into pink flakes modulated with tints of unspeakable softness; and the air had so much life and sweetness, that it was a pain to come within doors. … The leafless trees become spires of flame in the sunset, with the blue east for their background, and the stars of the dead calices of flowers, and every withered stem and stubble rimed with frost, contribute something to the mute music. (Emerson 1983, p. 15)

The scenery designated by Emerson as "the mute music" is contributed to by the coordination of the wind, cloud, light, air, blue sky, and withered plants, all of which are both the elements and the creators of the beautiful scenery. Among them, "stubble and stem" are more of a symbol of eternal beauty. These beautiful views are the effects of the orderly operation of the universe, similar to Dao's creative and transformative effects.

During the year, it is the elegance of winter scenery that Emerson enjoys most, instead of the summer. He is convinced that the winter is just as agreeable and admirable as the summer, as long as "beauty" always plays its role and never stops. For those who never fail to keep an eye on scenery, each moment, even the same patch of field, has its unique beauty. "The heavens change every moment, and reflect their glory or gloom on the plains beneath. The state of the crop in the surrounding farms alters the expression of the earth from week to week." (Emerson 1983, pp. 15–16). This change in appearance stems from the vitality of life, which in turn originates from the movement of the sun and the moon, a reflection of the power of beauty. Emerson asserts that the alternation of grassland and roadside wild plants represents a silent summer clock. As for the birds, insects, flowers, grass, and even aquatic creatures, although they are only embellishments of the landscape, their colorful and magnificent scenes are superior to any picture because their "magnificence" reflects the charm of "beauty". Yet, the landscape is also constantly changing, similar to a mirage seen by accident, which implies the changeful attribute of a natural time sequence. Every fragment in a natural time series has the color of life, reflecting the power of beauty.

Emerson not only applies music and clock as metaphors to describe a time sequence, but also provides a direct statement on the natural process. Here is a passage from the chapter "Commodity":

> Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man. The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapor to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain feeds the plant; the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man. (Emerson 1983, p. 12)

This is Emerson's scientific description of "beauty". The rule of the natural ecological cycle involves the circulation of air and water, the propagation and growth of seeds, the relationship between animals and plants, and the dependence of human beings on nature. He names it "the divine charity", but this "profit welfare" itself is not and will never supersede the higher level of grace, i.e., beauty. He makes the following statement in "Beauty":

> The intellect searches out the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God, and without the colors of affection. The intellectual and the active powers seem to succeed each other, and the exclusive activity of the one generates the exclusive activity of the other. There is something unfriendly in each to the other, but they are like the alternate periods of feeding and working in animals; each prepares and will be followed by the other. (Emerson 1983, p. 18)

"Beauty" is as sacred as God. Human activity is also the manifestation of the working of "beauty". As for "intellect", in Emerson's view, it is inseparable from "beauty". "In-

tellect", "action", and "beauty" interact and alternate to form a harmonious order of the unity of opposites. Emerson addresses that in order to comprehend the beauty of the time sequence hidden behind the transformation of natural objects: it is necessary to possess a pair of eyes that represent the soul of genius. However, in the *Zhuangzi*, the requisite is for the "zhiren" 至人 to attentively "listen" to the rhythm of nature.

Emerson conveys the implications of "beauty" using time sequence, integrating scientific elements, intuitive experience, and divine will. It is both abstract and figurative and boasts both logical thinking and divine intention. The language expression seems to be random but orderly. Its visual and intuitive features are consistent with the allegorical style of the *Zhuangzi*, while its scientific elements, e.g., terms such as sky, air, monsoon, evaporation, and irrigation, find their correspondences bearing ancient Chinese notions in the *Zhuangzi*, such as heaven (*tian* 天), Qi 气, yin 阴, and yang 阳. Above all, the two philosophers' affirmation of the sacred time sequence tends to be consistent.

3.3. The Satori from the Beauty of Dawn Light

In Emerson's experience of nature, there is a moment when he is "glad to brink of fear" (Emerson 1983, p. 10). That is the dawn. He watches the spectacle of morning from the hilltop over against his house:

> … from day-break to sun-rise, with emotions which an angel might share. The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to partake its rapid transformations; the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind. How does nature deify us with a few and cheap elements! (Emerson 1983, p. 15)

At dawn, the earth receives the first light of the morning, and the world turns from dark to bright. Notwithstanding, only for a moment, this magical scene will arouse people's infinite reverie. At this moment, people can appreciate the process of everything turning from fuzziness to clarity and can really perceive the tick-tack pace of time elapsing. Within the surroundings that seem real and illusory at the same time, people can become suddenly enlightened about the truth of the world.

It is difficult to sort out right from wrong for all the things in the world using logical debate. In the chapter "On Leveling All Things" (*qiwulun* 齐物论), the *Zhuangzi* terms this phenomenon "guyi zhiyao" 滑疑之耀, i.e., the flickering light that makes doubts even more perplexing. The *Zhuangzi* puts forth that: "if you want to affirm something that is denied and deny something that is affirmed, the best means is to be 'Illuminated' (*ming* 明)." (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 33). The so-called "Illuminated" does not have a clear definition but can be understood with the assistance of another statement that "the sage does not take this course, but opens things up to the light of heaven". This is the sage's insight to solve the dispute between right and wrong, the sage who is integrated with the virtue (*de* 德lit. the attribute of Dao being manifested in objects) of heaven and earth. There are few imagery descriptions in the *Zhuangzi* about "the light of heaven", but Emerson's *Nature* seems to be able to supplement this deficiency.

Emerson writes down how he feels about the dawn light in his essay collection *Nature*:

> The tempered light of the woods is like a perpetual morning, and is stimulating and heroic. The anciently reported spells of these places creep on us. The stems of pines, hemlocks, and oaks, almost gleam like iron on the excited eye. The incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them, and quit our life of solemn trifles. Here no history, or church, or state, … We were led in triumph by nature. (Emerson 1983, pp. 541–42)

The "light" in the morning is the manifestation of eternal "beauty" in Emerson's work and also the symbol of "virtue of sage" in the *Zhuangzi*. The illumination of this light seems to have magic power, and thereby, the jungle shines brilliantly. The magnificent and sacred bright scene makes people intoxicated as if they have entered a fairy forest and forgotten all

the right and wrong of the world in an instant, only walking along the way. Their spirit is attracted by the magic "Illumination", transcending so many trivial troubles in the world. On this point, there is sympathy between Zhuangzi and Emerson.

The "Dao's real existence and credibility" in "The Great Master" (*dazongshi* 大宗师) outlines the characteristics of Dao, i.e., it can be handed down without necessarily being taught, can be felt without being seen, and can create ghosts and gods and heaven and earth. A series of representative figures is listed, who have gained the power of Dao, including the gods of heaven and earth, the kings of the world, and the ministers who govern the world. Then appears the plot of Nanbo Zikui 南伯子葵, the seeker of Dao, asking Nüyu 女偊, the gainer of Dao, how to learn Dao. Nüyu first gives an account of the conditions for learning Dao, i.e., people who study must have "the innate capacity of a sage". Then, she describes the seven stages of learning it: "expelling from mind all under heaven" (*waitianxia* 外天下), "expelling from mind the existence of any definite things" (*waiwu* 外物), "expelling from mind life itself" (*waisheng* 外生), "the great enlightenment from darkness to brightness at dawn" (*zhaoche* 朝彻), "Seeing the wholeness of all things alone" (*jiandu* 见独), "no division of past and present" (*wugujin* 无古今), and "entering into the undying, unliving" (*busi busheng* 不死不生). The first three stages refer to dismissing surroundings and the physical body that cause oneself disturbances; the latter three stages refer to the three realms of viewing the world from the perspective of space and time. As for the "Zhaoche" 朝彻 in the middle, Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, a Daoist scholar in the Tang Dynasty, commented: "'Zhao' 朝 means morning. 'Che' means illumination. 'Zhaoche' 朝彻 describes the state of sudden realization to treat death and life equally and forget both outside things and one's own self, as if getting enlightened by the first bursting light of the rising sun. "(Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 148). Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 interprets "Zhaoche" 朝彻 as "getting enlightened by the first bursting light of the rising sun", corresponding to the "dawn light" described by Emerson. The "innate capacity of a sage" mentioned by Nüyu 女偊is equivalent to the genius who has experienced the "oversoul" mentioned by Emerson. The powers of those who have obtained access to Dao stated in "The Great Master" (*dazongshi* 大宗师) are similar to the "revelations of nature" stated by Emerson. In the chapter "Language" of *Nature,* he wrote: "At the call of a noble sentiment, again the woods wave, the pines murmur, the river rolls and shines, and the cattle low upon the mountains, as he saw and heard them in his infancy." (Emerson 1983, p. 23). With its unique scenery and sounds, nature is generous and caressing to nurture the inspiration of jungle children. "Long hereafter, amidst agitation and terror in national councils, —in the hour of revolution,—these solemn images shall reappear in their morning lustre, as fit symbols and words of the thoughts which the passing events shall awaken." (Emerson 1983, p. 23) In Emerson's view, language was originally a symbol of nature, and it is also logical for people's impressions of jungle scenery to be converted into persuasive language. Compared with Emerson's rational narration, the statement lacking the differentiation of man from god in "The Great Master" (*dazongshi* 大宗师) is somewhat of a bluff. However, it is their common direction to strengthen the power of nature.

The experience of "the great enlightenment from darkness to brightness at dawn" (*zhaoche* 朝彻) is not based on the logic of cause and effect but on the intuitive perception of the senses. It is accidental, similar to a dream that can be met but cannot be sought. In the words of "On Leveling All Things" (*qiwulun* 齐物论), it is an "accidental encounter" once in a lifetime. Emerson said:

> To the senses and the unrenewed understanding belongs a sort of instinctive belief in the absolute existence of nature. … This despotism of the senses binds us to nature as if we were a part of it, and shows us nature aloof, and, as it were, afloat. … These proceed from imagination and affection, and abate somewhat of the angular distinctness of objects. If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The best moments of life are these delicious

> awakenings of the higher powers, and the reverential withdrawing of nature before its God." (Emerson 1983, p. 33)

All these intuitive revelations entail rich associations with certain content in the *Zhuangzi*, e.g., the statement that "heaven and earth coexist with me, and all things are equal to me", and the profound implications of the fables of "the penumbra (*wangliang* 罔两) asking the shadow" and "Zhuangzi dreaming of butterflies" in "On Leveling All Things" (*qiwulun* 齐物论), as well as the discussion between Zhuangzi and Huishi 惠施 (circa 370B.C.–circa 310B.C.), another Chinese philosopher in the Warring States Period, on "human feeling without being affected by feelings" at the end of "The Signs of Fullness of Power" (*dechongfu* 德充符), and the "chaotic but never separated" relationship between things and oneself, which is repeatedly elaborated on in this classic.

3.4. The Natural Wilderness as the Transcendental Soul Space

The motive propelling Emerson to escape the sophisticated and overcautious style so willingly and let nature make him ecstatic is to appeal to people to return to God through direct communication with nature, so as to bypass the shackles of American religion that bound people's spirit at that time—Calvinism and its cumbersome religious disciplines. He expressed his ideas many times by writing articles and making speeches. In January 1842, when he delivered a speech at the Boston Freemasons, he said that "society is good when it dose not violate me; but best when it is likest to solitude" (Emerson 1983, p. 195). This kind of social model advocated by Emerson is similar to a copy of the "world of supreme virtue" (*zhide zhishi* 至德之世) in the "Steal Box" (*quqie* 胠箧) of the *Zhuangzi*, in which "people in neighboring countries can see each other and hear the crowing and barking of each other's chickens and dogs, but people do not communicate with each other until they die of old age". (Guo and Cheng 1998, pp. 207–8). In Emerson's essay collection *Nature*, he said that "the incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them, and quit our life of solemn trifles. Here no history, or church, or state, is interpolated on the divine sky and the immortal year" (Emerson 1983, p. 541). "History, church and state" are all elements of a secular society, symbolizing the center or power of society, which is designated as "Weique" 魏阙 in the *Zhuangzi*, i.e., the imperial court. The marginal places opposite the central "Weique" 魏阙 are "Rivers and Seas" (*jianghai* 江海) or "Wilderness" (*huangye* 荒野). The writing of the marginal zone has become the common interest of Zhuangzi and Emerson.

In his essay *Nature*, Emerson wrote that "the day, immeasurably long, sleeps over the broad hills and warm wide fields. To have lived through all its summer hours, seems longevity enough" (Emerson 1983, p. 541). Here, the fields, far away from the urban area, are beneficial to both human physical and mental health. In the chapter "Prospects" of Emerson's *Nature*, he said: "A man is a god in ruins. When men are innocent, life shall be longer, and shall pass into the immortal as gently as we awake from dreams" (Emerson 1983, pp. 45–46). Here, the environment in which people live, including nature and society, is replaced with "ruins", which should be an exaggerated metaphor, emphasizing that people can live naively and simply in places where there is no human trace, or the trace has been abandoned, and can prolong their life. "To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone" (Emerson 1983, p. 14). This statement, which is in Emerson's summary in the chapter "Beauty", emphasizes the medicinal effect of the wide and vast space of nature, i.e., the wilderness, on the human spirit. Emerson talks so many times about the benefits of the wilderness to life in his writing, while the wilderness is exactly the ideal realm advocated by the *Zhuangzi*.

In the *Zhuangzi*, the domain of pleasure reached by those who have obtained access to Dao is called "the space of nothing" (*wuheyou zhixiang* 无何有之乡). "Nothing" indicates the non-interference of whatever it is, but it is delineated in the *Zhuangzi* as an open and boundless wilderness. "Space of nothing" and "wilderness" are both metaphors, signifying the supreme realm of Dao in a desolate wilderness without any human trace. In

"Responding to the Emperors and Kings" (*yingdiwang* 应帝王), Heavenroot (*tiangen* 天根) asked a nameless man about Dao. The nameless man, who was wandering in "the space of nothing" and "the wilds of graveyard" (*kuanglang zhiye* 旷埌之野), blamed Heavenroot (*tiangen* 天根) for disturbing his mood. "Kuanglang" 旷埌 refers to a graveyard, i.e., the place of death. Death means returning to the initial state of life. "The wilds of graveyard" is also "the space of nothing". In "Lie Yukou" 列御寇, it is directly written that "the Ultimate Person (*zhiren* 至人) reverts the pure kernel of spirit in them to the beginninglessness, sweetly sleeping in a place with nothing" (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 594). The spirit of those who have entered the realm of Dao returns to the original state of human beings, hides in a domain without human intervention, and enjoys carefree happiness. At the end of "Wandering Far and Unfettered" (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遥游), Huishi 惠施 says that his big tree is useless. Zhuangzi suggests to him: "Why not plant it in a space without anything else, on a vast and boundless wilderness? Then you wander aimlessly around it, sleeping carefree under it! You won't attract an axe to cut down, nothing can harm you. You're of no use, what's bothering you? (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 18). The "space of nothing" is demonstrated as a realm of pleasure free from man-made disasters. Compared with Emerson's "health" value, the "wilderness" in the *Zhuangzi* provides a spiritual refuge for those who have accessed Dao, in a cruel reality in which life is subject to destruction at any moment. Emerson also reveals the role of "refuge" that the wilderness plays in *Nature*: "In the woods we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all." (Emerson 1983, p. 10). Does not the description also apply to Liezi 列子, who "rides the wind", and Songrongzi 宋荣子, who "won't work hard because the whole world praises him, and won't be depressed because the whole world blames him" in "Wandering Far and Unfettered" (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遥游)? Emerson comments: "The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me. I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages." (Emerson 1983, p. 10). In the "wilderness", there is the "beauty" he is so obsessed with, so he tends to forget the secular hierarchy. This is in harmony with the ideas of "nobles and slaves respecting each other" and "unity of all things" in "On Leveling All Things" (*qiwulun* 齐物论). According to the *Zhuangzi*, the "way of great beauty" consists in the initial state of the universe. "Wu" 无does not originally mean "none". Xu Shen 许慎 said that "Wu" is a special word connected with "yuan" (元 lit. beginning) (Xu 1963, p. 267). In philosophy, "wu" 无 refers to the obscure state of matter, that is, the state before the formation of matter.

To sum up, the symbolic fields, ruins, and wilderness and the metaphorical "space of nothing", "boundless wilderness", and "wilds of graveyard" all refer to the original state of the universe, intact from the impact of human beings. They are the realms inhabited by "beauty" and Dao, and the common spiritual hometown of the Zhuangzi School and Emerson.

In one speech on *The Daoist Aesthetics and the Western Culture*, the Chinese scholar Ye Weilian 叶维廉 criticizes the linguistic style characteristic of scientific thinking by quoting T.E. Hulme (1883–1917), the representative figure of the British and American modernist poetry school, "The miscellaneous universal images that are beyond the descriptive power of pen and ink, are sectioned and reduced to just a few symbols and codes from the perspective of human subjective prejudices." (Ye 2002). The beauty of nature, belonging to such a category of indescribable imagery, should be observed and appreciated personally in the real setting of nature, and then "conveyed to the readers in a tangible and perceptible manner through visualized, intuitive and concrete language." (Ye 2002). The great philosophers, facing the appeal from nature, will come to the same contemplation: both

Emerson situated in a boundless jungle and the River God Hebo 河伯, the spokesman of Zhuangzi, confronting the vast sea, have been overwhelmed by the same enlightenment that nature is all-encompassing, whereas they themselves are belittled. From observing the blossoming and withering of flowers and the spring's sowing and autumn's harvest, they have perceived the harmony and consummation of all natural things existing in the chain of time sequence, as well as the infinite charm of the universal order. When the first light of dawn manifests itself, transforming the dark earth into brightness, they obtain their sudden access to the profundity and power of life, with Emerson describing the outlines of things turning "transparent" and the *Zhuangzi* describing this spiritual experience as "the great enlightenment from darkness to brightness at dawn" (*zhaoche* 朝彻). The idealized wilderness and the imagined "space of nothing", isolated from the bustling noises of the masses, are the places where the individual spirit can be elevated in tranquil solicitude, where Emerson forgets all about the hierarchy between superiors and inferiors, thereby having a feeling of "intimacy" and where it is pointed in the *Zhuangzi* that people can enjoy their natural span of life, intact from any harm. By resorting to poetic language or allegorical narration, they have succeeded in revealing the mysteries of the beauty of nature: nature, as an expression of the universe, pleases the human spirit from a simple level; its nurture of life is the virtue gifted by God from the angle of a deeper understanding; and the ultimate realm of beauty consists in the integration of the human mind and nature, which is manifested in the form of art. All these ideas about the beauty of nature are impressively illustrated by a series of stories or landscapes, avoiding the intricate trivialities of argumentation.

4. The Closeness of Aesthetic Concepts

The above text analyzes two layers of similarity in the expression of beauty between Emerson and the *Zhuangzi*: firstly, both take the original meaning of beauty as the conceptual meaning of beauty; secondly, both choose the same natural objects as the medium for expressing beauty. The emergence of this phenomenon should be directly related to their similar perception of beauty, and the reason behind it can also be said to be the result of this phenomenon, i.e., their similar aesthetic concepts. Below, we will analyze the aesthetic concepts of Emerson and the *Zhuangzi* from three dimensions: (1) admiration for natural vitality, (2) the importance of spiritual discovery, and (3) the unity of beauty.

4.1. Beauty Contains the Attribute of Inner Vitality

Emerson said, at the beginning of the chapter on beauty, that beauty, as the world in ancient Greece, "is the constitution of all things", which primarily forms the sky, mountains, trees, and animals. Emerson also had an important viewpoint: "Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe" (Emerson 1983, pp. 14, 19). Why is "the constitution of all things" beauty? What is the relationship between "world", "universe", and "nature"? This depends not only on Emerson's definition of "nature" but also on analyzing the original meaning of nature. He wrote in the Introduction of *Nature*:

> Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses;—in its common and in its philosophical import. … Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. (Emerson 1983, p. 8)

Emerson divided nature into philosophical nature and common nature. The common sense of nature refers to the material world that has not been fundamentally changed by humans, such as space, air, rivers, leaves, etc. Philosophically, nature and the soul together constitute the universe. Soul, also known as ME, refers to the subjective self. Nature is NOT ME, which refers to things that are separate from the subjective self, including common

nature, art, all other men, and one's own body, referred to as "Wu" 吾 in the *Zhuangzi*. This common sense of nature is equivalent to the original form of the ancient Greek "world" and is one of the subjects of Emerson's chapter on "beauty", that is, the "world" of beauty.

The reason why material nature is beautiful is that it can inspire people's minds and influence their lives, in Emersonian words, serving people's desire for beauty and giving us light. This can also be found from the etymology of nature. The root of the word "nat" refers to birth, while the noun suffix "ure" refers to behavior or outcome. The original meaning of nature should be an innate behavior or characteristic. The origin of this word in ancient Greek refers to self-birth and self-growth, or rather an automatic force that organizes life (Jia 2012). Emerson understood nature by perceiving its primitive vitality. Faced with the sunshine of dawn, the scenery of winter, the sequence of nature, and the vast wilderness, he felt the rhythmic beauty of primitive vitality, which elevated his spirit. At this point, the nature of the common import has transformed into the philosophical nature in its irresistible appeal to the soul.

In the *Zhuangzi*, the universe or heaven and earth are both works and incarnations of Dao, similar to what Gao Shan said about material nature and effective nature (see Gao 2023). The "great beauty" that exists between heaven and earth is the expression of Dao. It is quiet and silent, constantly evolving, yet it makes all things thrive. The merit of creating and transforming "great beauty" can also be traced back to the original meaning of the Chinese word "Ziran" 自然.

According to the explanation in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* 说文解字, "自" (*zi* lit. self) refers to the state of breathing through the nose, which is the beginning of life, and "然" (*ran*) is an ancient character for "燃" (*ran*), meaning the state of burning, figuratively inferring the state of decay of things. Nature actually refers to the process and state of the beginning and end of life. For humans, the fate of life and death is beyond their control, so nature originally referred to the state or characteristic of self-emergence and self-destruction, not interfered with by human intervention, and then was extended to mean the essentiality and nature of things (see Jia 2022).

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that the beauty discussed by Emerson and the *Zhuangzi* stems from the power of life. Beauty is not only the creation of life but also the manifestation of creators.

4.2. Aesthetic Requires Spiritual Insight and Transcendence

Having explained that beauty lies in the constitution of the world at the beginning of the chapter on beauty, Emerson put forth the significance of human eyes in the discovery of beauty, i.e., "the plastic power of the human eye" (Emerson 1983, p. 14). It is mainly thanks to the power of the eyes that human beings are capable of deriving a sense of delight from the contours, colors, movements, and combinations of natural objects. The eyes serve as windows to the soul, which means the discovery of the eyes stems from the perceptive ability of the soul. In other words, the involvement of spiritual elements is key to the presentation of beauty. "The high and divine beauty which can be loved without effeminacy, is that which is found in combination with the human will" (Emerson 1983, p. 16). Through spiritual communication with nature, humans can have both their sentiments and morals elevated. "Nature stretcheth out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness" (Emerson 1983, p. 17). Situated in vast forests, people will marvel at its boundlessness and mystery and cannot help feeling ashamed of their own superficiality. Faced with the sequence of sunrise and sunset, the rise of clouds and the fall of rain, and the fading of spring and the coming of autumn, people will be in awe of the harmonious unity of nature and the punctual flow of the time sequence. The sun's rays at dawn will enlighten people with the infinity of both time and space. In the background of the expansive wilderness with its fathomless potential of vitality, people cannot but admire a category of infinite and immortal beauty. In the last case, the wilderness does not belong to any category of material nature anymore but serves as a spiritual space people acclaim and appreciate.

In the *Zhuangzi*, the great beauty between heaven and earth does not only consist in changes in the natural objects but also lies in the human understanding of the rules and the infinite power of the functioning of heaven and earth, and thereby taking after heaven and earth and returning to the innate state of tranquil and purposeless behavior. Equivalent to the Emersonian wilderness, both the "space of nothing" (无何有之乡) and the "boundless wilderness" (广漠之野) in the *Zhuangzi* are the ideal realms of the Daoist spiritual transcendence and figurative expressions of a type of soul space. Proficient in metaphors and imagination, the *Zhuangzi* has its "space" and "wilderness" related to human living surroundings. "Space" (*xiang* 乡), similar to a small town, refers to the precincts of residence for the common masses in ancient times and is later used to indicate the hometown or the dreamland desired from the innermost heart. The "wilderness", originally meaning the area beyond the suburbs, is a place far away from cities and cultures, which human beings rarely inhabit. The "space of nothing" applies hyperbole rhetoric and specifically refers to the place in its natural state, alienated from the disturbing interference of human social trivialities. The "boundless wilderness", i.e., the vast and empty outskirts, corresponds with the Emersonian wilderness. In fact, "to sleep in the boundless wilderness" represents a carefree state of life, and the wilderness does not necessarily signify any specific patch of soil or any agricultural land, which manifests the spiritual transcendence of Daoism.

4.3. Beauty Is the Unity of Multidimensional Connotations

In his description of beauty, Emerson mentions multiple different terms, all of which have characteristics related to beauty. The "great beauty" in the *Zhuangzi* is the manifestation of Dao. Beauty and Dao stem from the same origin despite their different designations. Dao is an all-encompassing term, similar to beauty, with rich connotations and infinite denotation. Beauty, as Kant comments, has an attribute beyond conceptualization, and Dao is also hard to define. Both aesthetic and Dao-obtaining procedures are the integration of the subjective spirit and the objective target, as well as the unity of intuition and intellect.

Emerson once said: "Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue" (Emerson 1983, p. 16). Therefore, the connection between beauty, God, and virtue was constructed. At the end of the chapter on beauty, he summarized the following:

> The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty. This element I call an ultimate end. No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same all. (Emerson 1983, p. 19)

From this passage, it can be seen that in Emerson's thoughts, the world and the soul are unified, and truth, beauty, goodness, and virtue are the different faces of the soul's ultimate end, in other words, the different faces of the world. With an aesthetic appreciation of nature, the soul can ascend and directly converse with God. This elevated soul was named the Oversoul by Emerson.

Emerson's comment combines important philosophical concepts together, such as beauty, goodness, truth, virtue, God, fairness, universe, world, nature, spirit, soul, and ultimate end, which demonstrates the holistic unity of the universe. However, within this unity, the soul is elevated by Emerson to the summit, which reflects the human-centered Western tradition in his thoughts. He ultimately persisted: "Beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good. It must stand as a part, and not as yet the last or highest expression of the final cause of Nature" (Emerson 1983, p. 19).

However, in the *Zhuangzi*, all the meanings are hidden in the core philosophical category of Dao. The terms such as beauty, goodness, truth, and virtue serve to explain Dao. The air flows between heaven and earth; all things are born and come to death; birds fly in the sky; fishes swim in the water: all these natural phenomena are the appearances of great beauty and the working of Dao. It is written in "The Great Master" (*dazongshi* 大宗师) that "The huge block of earth bears my physical form, labors me with life, eases me with old

age, rests me with death. Thus to make my life is something good and to make my death is also something good" (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 143). "The huge block of earth" means the earth created by Dao. Any effect Dao exerts on life is attributed to goodness. Dao and virtue are unified. In "The Sign of Virtue Complete" (*dechongfu* 德充符), it is written that "Virtue is the establishment of perfect harmony." (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 124). A person who has reached the harmonious state of Dao is one with virtue. If this virtue is manifested as drifting and indistinct as the silky string, it is called "Obscure Virtue" (*xuande* 玄德) or "Great Obedience" (*dashun* 大顺). In essence, it is Dao, but in concrete things, it is called virtue. In "On Leveling All Things" (*qiwulun* 齐物论), it is written that "It would seem as though there must be a True Master among them. But whether I succeed in discovering its situation or not, it neither adds to nor detracts from his Truth" (Guo and Cheng 1998, p. 30). Dao's true existence as the noumenon will not be impaired even if its true conditions are beyond human comprehension. The truth here is Dao itself, and the person who has obtained access to Dao is called a "True Person" (*zhenren* 真人). Therefore, it can be seen that beauty, goodness, truth, and virtue are united in the obscure core philosophical category of Dao in the *Zhuangzi*. However, as for the role played by the human mind, it is emphasized in the *Zhuangzi* that an individual should forget his or her own physical body and spiritual mind, so as to go with the flow of the Dao of nature. It is the Daoist aesthetic essence to subjugate individual wisdom to the service of the unity of nature and man. This explains why there still exists a deep differentiation between the *Zhuangzi* and Emerson and why they have embarked on distinct development trails, despite their miscellaneous similarities.

5. Conclusions

British aesthetician Bernard Bosanquet once said: Natural beauty is not objective, it exists in the fleeting concepts of ordinary people. It depends on human observation of nature and the subject's aesthetic appreciation (Bosanquet 1985). This article, from the perspective of aesthetic experience, deeply and thoroughly explores the commonality between American transcendentalism and early Chinese Taoist thoughts with a detailed comparison of Chinese and English texts. It summarizes the similarity between Emerson and Zhuangzi's understanding of the inherent essence of beauty, that is, beauty lies in the inherent vitality, the transcendentality of the soul, and the richness and unity of connotation. This metaphysical understanding of ontology stems from their respect for the beauty of the principles of material nature and their perception of the beauty of natural things. Emerson's thinking emphasizes logic but has imagery; the thinking of the *Zhuangzi*, although characterized by vivid storytelling, also has an inherent logical approach. Emerson uses a family of meaningful terms to express beauty; the *Zhuangzi*, on the other hand, reveals the multidimensional meanings of the highest philosophical category Dao. Within these two distinct discourse systems, the experience and presentation of beauty share the same goal. The vastness, profoundness, harmony, and grace of the natural world make people feel spiritually peaceful, introspective, uplifted, and reverential. Emerson sees himself in the natural scenery and verifies the existence of the Oversoul, while Zhuangzi achieves a transcendent realm through human imitation and obedience to the beauty of heaven and earth.

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that this article strengthens the analysis of relevant concepts in cross-cultural comparative research. Dao and beauty are both concepts that are difficult to define and are thereby open to interpretation. Tracing the implications of these words in a specific context is the approach to breaking through the linguistic obstacles in cross-cultural research. Emerson defines beauty as "the composition of all things in the world", which connects with Dao in the *Zhuangzi*, while Dao, as the holistic manifestation of the universe, is the "Great Beauty" itself, thus unlocking the commonality in aesthetic experience between the two. The Chinese aesthetician Liu Shaojin 刘绍谨 comments that despite the lack of a conceptual system corresponding to Western aesthetics in ancient China, the Daoist classics boast "a plentiful resource of aesthetic ideology", even if they do not treat beauty as the object of exploration. The Daoist aesthetic ideology, with

its enlightening and implicative attributes, is "open to an incessant procedure of interpretation oriented both to the past and the modern times" (Liu et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the association between the meaning of the Chinese character mei 美 and that of English beauty, must overcome the obstacles set by changes in its sense and trace it back to its initial implications in the context of the *Zhuangzi*, as this composes the linguistic cornerstone for the essays of Emerson and the *Zhuangzi* to encounter in the poetic nature.

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Notes

1 The "nature" used by Emerson is synonymous with the "Ziran" 自然 in Chinese Taoist classics, both referring to the "natural state of things without human interference", and its typical representative is nature rather than human society (Jia 2022).

2 Similar to the classics of the pre-Qin period in China, the book *Laozi* is usually considered to have been written by Laozi alone, while the author of the *Zhuangzi* may have been multiple people because, at that time, people did not have a clear sense of authorship, and often used the founder's name of the school of thought as the book title. This is a characteristic of pre-Qin works. When using these two names in this article, to avoid misunderstandings, we refer to the book rather than the author, and the definite article "the" is added before it. The translations of the original text of the *Laozi* mainly consult the version: Lynn, Richard John. (translator). 1999. *A New Translation of the Tao-Te Ching of Laozi As Interpreted by Wang Bi*. New York: Columbia University Press. The translations of the original text of the *Zhuangzi* mainly consult three translation versions, namely, [1] Graham. A.C. (translator). 2001. *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. [2] Ziporyn, Brooks (translator). 2020. *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. [3] Wang, Rongpei 汪榕培. (translator). 1999. *Zhuangzi*. Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House.

3 Due to the correspondence between "ziran 自然" in Chinese and "nature" in English, there is confusion about the meaning of the words. Liu Xiaogan 刘笑敢 distinguishes between material nature and humanistic nature to highlight their spontaneity (Liu 2006, pp. 316–21). In fact, the phenomenon of polysemy is very common in the ancient Chinese language. The "ziran" 自然 in Chapter 25 of *Laozi* has the meanings of both the material nature and the natural attribute of spontaneity. Dao's characteristic is "wuwei" 无为, which means that human non-purposeful behavior is the function of Dao because "wu" means "Dao".

4 Qi 气 is a philosophical concept in ancient Chinese culture, meaning "vital energy" 元气. It is usually divided into yin 阴, yang 阳, wind, rain, darkness, and brightness, with yin and yang being the most important. *Yin* means dark and hidden, while *yang* means high and bright.

5 As Grossman observes: "Emerson's brand of fresh home-grown English adds a radiant color to the ancient thoughts of the Chinese Master." (Grossman 2007, Foreword, p. xxi).

6 Emerson wrote: "Some men have the perception of difference predominant, and are conversant with surfaces and trifles, with coats and watches, and faces and cities... And other men abide by the perception of identity. These are the orientals, the philosophers, the men of faith and divinity." Richardson wrote: "Emerson's absorption in Asian religion and literature cannot be understood unless one sees that for him the East was the proof persuasive precisely because it was non-Western that at the deep end of the pool, where it matters, Westerner and Easterner are profoundly alike, indeed identical. " Emerson's "identity" reflects both his "cross-cultural thinking ability" and his "open mind", ultimately realizing the fact that there are similar thinkings and ideas in the East and West. (Richardson 1996, p. 408).

[7] Sima Tan 司马谈 of the Han Dynasty, the father of Sima Qian, talked "On the Gist of the Six Schools of Thoughts": "Emptiness is the normality of Dao, and obedience to Dao is the principle of the king." (Sima 1982, p. 3292.) Ban Gu 班固 of the Han Dynasty commented, in "Art and Literature Annals—A Brief Introduction to Scholars", that "The school of Daoism probably originated from the historian, who had recorded the ancient and modern ways of success and failure, survival, disaster and fortune... This is the art of the king to rule the world." (Ban 1962, p. 1732.)

[8] Bu 部 is the name of the category classified by Xu Shen 许慎 according to the composition of the Chinese characters. There are 206 categories of Bu in Shuo Wen Jie Zi 说文解字, for example, Yang Bu 羊部, Gan Bu 甘部, Da Bu 大部, Shi Bu 示部, etc., and the meanings of the Chinese characters belonging to the same Bu are related.

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Chinese Thought and Transcendentalism: Ecology, Place and Conservative Radicalism

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Abstract: My central claim is that resonances between Transcendentalist and Chinese philosophies are so strong that the former cannot be adequately appreciated without the latter. I give attention to the *Analects*, the *Mengzi* and the Tiantai *Lotus Sutra*, which Transcendentalists read. Because there was conceptual sharing across Chinese traditions, plus evidence suggesting Transcendentalists explored other texts, my analysis includes discussions of Daoism and Weishi, Huayan and Chan Buddhism. To name just some similarities between the targeted outlooks, Transcendentalists adopt something close to *wu-wei* or effortless action; though hostile to hierarchy, they echo the Confucian stress on rituals or habits; Thoreau's individualistic libertarianism is moderated by a radical causal holism found in many Chinese philosophies; and variants of Chinese Buddhism get close to Transcendentalist metaphysics and epistemologies, which anticipate radical embodied cognitive science. A specific argument is that Transcendentalists followed some of their Chinese counterparts by *conserving* the past and converting it into radicalism. A meta-argument is that ideas were exchanged via trade from Europe through North Africa to Western Asia and India into the Far East, and contact with Indigenous Americans led to the same. This involved degrees of misrepresentation, but it nonetheless calls upon scholars to adopt more global approaches.

Keywords: American Transcendentalism; Confucianism; Chinese Buddhism; Chinese philosophy; Daoism; ecology and place; Emerson; Thoreau; metaphysics and epistemology; social and political philosophy

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1. Introduction

For decades now, scholars have asserted that North American Indigenous values seeped into Transcendentalism and later classical pragmatism (Wilshire 2000; Pratt 2002; Mann 2005). The inspiration of Brahmanism is also obvious, with Thoreau regularly lauding the Bhagavad Gita. That Chinese views inflected US intellectual history is another premise that gets occasional but consistent attention (e.g., Carpenter 1930; Christy 1932; Detweiler 1962; Versluis 1993; Foust 2017). A prevailing fashion, however, cuts in a contrary direction to assert that classical American authors were dilettantes, orientalists and colonial appropriators (Scott 2007; Isenberg 2013; Altman 2018; Willsky-Ciollo 2018). Without claiming that nineteenth century Americans had the opportunity to refine distinctions between separate strands of Asian thought, my position in this article will be that Chinese philosophy illuminates main themes in Transcendentalism. Earlier US Founding Fathers talked about Chinese outlooks, too (Wang 2014), echoing key European Enlightenment figures (Lai 1985; Ching and Oxtoby 1992; Kow 2016). But it is in Transcendentalism that one finds rich resonances with Chinese ideas about causal holism, intersubjectivity, transformational idealism and interactional realism. These parallels unlock Transcendentalist peculiarities, which range from their duel emphasis on radical individualism and extreme moral culpability for social ills, to their merging of idealism, constructivism and realism.

The two best-known Transcendentalists—Thoreau and Emerson, the targets of this article—often quoted from the two most famous Confucian compendiums: the *Analects*

and the *Mengzi*. Thoreau additionally translated portions of these texts from French. He may have done the same for an excerpt from the *Lotus Sutra*—influential in the Tiantai school of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism—for the journal *The Dial*, but it is debated whether he was the translator (Scott 2007), despite being the issue's editor (Fields and Bogin 2022). Although Thoreau's writings make no explicit references to Daoism, they nonetheless exhibit parallels, and reasons can be offered for this. First, Thoreau spent time exploring forests, lakes, rivers and mountains, observing winter succumbing to spring and comparable cycles of change. When these experiences are combined with his practical know-how plus his absorption in the aesthetic and the fact that both are beyond words, it is not implausible to speculate that all this encouraged him to think a little like a Daoist. Second, Thoreau's reading brought him into contact with the sinologist Guillaume Pauthier, who translated the *Daodejing*, with the former's notebooks hinting that he read this text (Ch'en 1972). Third, despite sharp differences between Confucians and Daoists, they share some nomenclature and ways of seeing (Berthrong 2003; Slingerland 2007), and elements from both seeped into Buddhism after it entered China from India (Tang 1951; Ge 2014, chp. 6). Thus, vague familiarity with Chinese Buddhism or even Confucianism may have been a path to absorbing some Daoist elements. Fourth, there were longstanding exchanges of goods and ideas from Mediterranean Europe through North Africa to West, Central, South and East Asia (Sen 2009), with one scholar (Mair 2012) speculating that the word *dao* has extremely old roots that spread into ancient languages around the world. This last explanation is not specific to Transcendentalism, but fits the general claim that intercultural commonalities exist and often for specifiable reasons.

Now, Transcendentalists were not systematic in their engagements with Asian outlooks and sometimes flatly confused matters (e.g., Emerson 1845, p. 290). However, this is unsurprising since they lacked the resources that most of us today enjoy at our fingertips. Simultaneously, virtually all people confuse matters even from their own cultures, *yet* nonetheless, absorb core elements. A presumption will be made that Transcendentalists did this with Chinese ideas. So while I appreciate the complicated pluralism in Confucian, Daoist and Chinese Buddhist systems and that the region has other philosophies besides, I will not get too microscopic in my analysis because that does not serve my purpose of showing how Chinese philosophy generally illuminates Transcendentalism.

A point of stress will be on place-based ecological orientations in classical Chinese and American outlooks—"ecology" referring to dynamic systems that give things existence and meaning. In addition to Chinese perspectives directly impacting Transcendentalism, kinships between them may have arisen from the fact that people from both regions faced slow bucolic realities (Dewey 1922a). In any case, Transcendentalism was a major intellectual force in the US, and Emerson was even William James's godfather. Together, this makes it easier to see why the next generation of American philosophers were thinking in East Asian directions—indeed, before Dewey had his two-year stint in China, which profoundly affected him (Dewey 1939; Shusterman 2004). This last point is important because pragmatists entwined historically with phenomenologists (they sometimes read one another). Both directly influenced ecological psychology, and the three movements together exerted sway on contemporary embodied cognitive science, which sometimes draws inspiration from ancient Asia (see Varela et al. 1991).

An obvious part of what motivated Transcendentalists to their views was their deep dissatisfaction with the present, but they were a little unusual in that they overtly looked to the ancients for answers. In effect, they conserved the past to transgress the present in progressive ways, echoing texts like the *Analects* (7:1). Therefore, Transcendentalists and at least some of their ancient Chinese counterparts may be regarded as advancing a conservatively inspired progressive radicalism, whether on the level of their social philosophy, epistemology or metaphysics. If it is true that they did this specifically by absorbing Chinese philosophies, then the situation is that we have to look to Asia to understand key aspects of American intellectual history.

2. Intercultural Exchanges

There are a number of assertions I plan to make, such as the claim that Thoreau adopted something close to the Chinese principle of *wu-wei*, or effortless action; or that the Transcendentalist emphasis on habits parallels the Confucian stress on rituals, even while rejecting hierarchical dimensions of the latter; or that Transcendentalists' version of libertarian individualism might have been moderated by the causal holism of various Chinese philosophies; or that the least skeptical variants of Chinese Buddhism get close to Transcendentalist metaphysics, which merge normally opposing constructivist and realist notions. If all this is so, then grasping Chinese thought is an important step in understanding American traditions. Before defending these assertions, however, I offer a schematic account of how Westerners have seen themselves in relation to the world, for this bears on dominant styles of thinking and conceptions of reality. Transcendentalists struggled against these currents, which is arguably a reason non-Western outlooks fascinated them.

A peculiarity of Modern Western intellectual history is that for all the disagreements between its philosophical combatants, relatively few disputed that mind is an inner theater. This led to an essentially private notion of self. For instance, despite their different metaphysical and epistemological standpoints, Descartes (1637), Locke (1690) and Kant (1781) in one way or another understood the self as something internal or hidden and atomistic or individuated. Heidegger's (1927) existential phenomenology began moving beyond this internalist picture. However, his outward disposition was somewhat undercut by his quasi-moral judgment that individuals achieve "authentic" being (of self) when they come to terms with the separateness entailed by the "mineness" of their own death. Heidegger began as an aspiring theologian, and his normative commitments may have partly traced to Augustine's pre-Modern concept of self as an inner sanctum for dialoguing with God, which scholars often locate as the origin of Modern notions (e.g., Viney 1969; Taylor 1989; Berrios and Marková 2003).

History, of course, is not as tidy as writings about it. One suspects the tracing of private self to Augustine is overplayed. Also, there are at least partial deviations from atomistic and internalistic conceptions, Spinoza (1677) and Rousseau (1762) being cases. While an individualist, Nietzsche (c. 1885, 1887, 1888) is another exception because he asserts humans are a plurality of competing impulses and that the ego is an illusion arising from grammatical and other kinds of confusions. Late Moderns, such as Dewey (1922b) and Merleau-Ponty (1964), jettisoned the notion of exclusively private self on the grounds that psychological existence is embodied and socially embedded. Adding to the historical complexity, Enlightenment notables like Spinoza, Leibniz, Wolff and Voltaire were all curious about Chinese thought (Lai 1985; Ching and Oxtoby 1992; Kow 2016). Later, Schopenhauer showed interest in Asian philosophy (App 2010), and he—with others like Spinoza and Emerson—swayed Nietzsche, who influenced existential phenomenology. Interestingly, this same period had multiple European authors pondering Indigenous American ways of life. Some (Stubben 2000; Mann 2005) suggest this seeded new ideas about human liberty, though there is debate about the amount of respect that Europeans had for Indigenous cultures, and it was tough for commentators to be adequately informed.

Another reason history is messier than writings about it is that the Western canon becomes less categorically so as one goes back in time. Ancient Greece and Rome traded goods and ideas through North Africa and into the East (Sen 2009), with Augustine living in North Africa. The Islamic world preserved Greek literature, and Muslims from regions bordering India influenced Christians such as Aquinas. Likewise, the Chinese Buddhist sage Fazang had ancestry in what would become the Muslim world (Van Norden and Jones 2019). Therefore, it may not be serendipitous that pre-Modern "Western" outlooks often mirrored non-Western ones that stress public habits, customs and social relations as bases for self. In addition to showing up in Africa and Ancient Greece (Crippen 2016, 2021a; Naaman 2017), such views appear in Confucianism despite its differences from other regional traditions as well as its own internal pluralism (Ames 2008; D'Ambrosio 2018; Rosemont 2018). The Islamic stories of Rumi (trans. Mafi 2018) and the Brahmanical Bhagavad Gita

(trans. Miller 1986) similarly reject atomistic self in as much as both hold that enlightenment entails an oceanic joining with God or the divine cosmos that reveals individual existence is illusory.

As compared to Confucians, who place a premium on fulfilling proper social roles, Daoists and Chinese Buddhists are more anti-hierarchical and inclined to remove themselves from society to cultivate enlightenment. Yet despite these differences and internal sectarian variations, these three traditions generally align in arguing that things only manifest within larger wholes without which the particulars do not exist. The *Daodejing* [*Tao Te Ching*] holds that beings are harmonies of contraries so that "Something and Nothing produce each other" (trans. Lau 1972, chp. 2), as when presence and void make a valley. Chinese Buddhist texts, such as *The Flower Ornament Scripture* (trans. Cleary 1993, chp. 39) and another sometimes attributed to Dushun (trans. Tanabe 1999, p. 473), evoke the Vedic metaphor of Indra's bejeweled net. Here, each jewel mirrors the entirety, so that the reflection in every gemstone is dependent on the interrelated whole. The net itself reiterates the point. This is because the ties and web depend on each other to instantiate as knots and a net. The *I Ching* is widely regarded as proto-Confucian, but also important in certain developments in Daoism and Chinese Buddhism (Tang 2015; Hon 2019). Pondering this book, Carl Jung (1950) compared ancient Chinese contemplation to modern quantum models, which are "decidedly psychophysical" (p. xxiv) in recognizing that observations change what is observed. The claim holds at macrolevels as well because an object has no specifiable length in isolation since its dimensions vary according to the relative velocity at which it is encountered. Transcendentalists and later pragmatists made similar assertions. Dewey's (1929) pragmatic work would even reference non-classical physics in advancing the point. However, Dewey would add that in everyday life we register things by shaking and rattling them or else altering conditions under which they are observed, as when bending starlight with lenses (see Crippen 2021b).

This schematic history links to some points on which I will build. One is that atomistic self-construals that dominate the West appear to translate to analytical thinking styles, characterized by the dissection of problems into parts and attention to focal information. This is compared to more context-sensitive styles typical of other cultures, despite variations within and between them (Nisbett et al. 2001; Masuda and Nisbett 2001; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Mpofu 1994; Kiuchi 2006; Shell and Flowerday 2019; Ren and Kuai 2023). Psychologists, for example, have found that Chinese and Japanese participants have high awareness of what is occurring in overall scenes, whereas Americans attend primarily to foreground objects (Masuda and Nisbett 2001; Boduroglu et al. 2009).

As if recognizing prevailing Western thinking styles, Thoreau (1854, p. 98) said "the intellect is a cleaver", which "discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things". He not only characterized thinking as an analytic dissecting tool. He also distanced himself from this kind of cognition by saying "the intellect" instead of "my intellect". Thoreau went on to deploy an organic, ecological and bodily metaphor: "My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore-paws, and with it I would . . . burrow my way through these hills". This conveys a sense that primal comprehension is practical know-how of a sort that involves not only digging but merging one's mind with the earth. The passage thereby suggests that wisdom is in the land, an idea carried in Indigenous American philosophies (DeMallie 1984; Whitt et al. 2001), along with Confucian, Daoist and Chinese Buddhist notions about sacred mountains, directions and suchlike (Paracka 2012). Embodied movement, such as that involved in burrowing, is an indivisible gestalt that cannot—save arbitrarily—be sliced into discrete bits (see Merleau-Ponty 1945, pp. 367–68). Thoreau's comments here contain a further acknowledgement that gaining a sense of one's surroundings means rooting about in them, making palpable contact. Thus, while Thoreau advocated self-sufficient individualism, his account contains an admission that even observing things changes them, so that we cannot exist without affecting others. This principle is core to his metaphysics, epistemology and social

views, and it is an outlook for which he would have found a wealth of materials in Chinese philosophy.

3. Personal Life, Place and *Dao*

Although constantly lauding ancient books, Transcendentalists wearied of what they saw as an era that fixated on writing about dead European authors. Emerson (1836, p. 5) famously complained: "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" Thoreau (1854, 1862, 1863) repeated similar grievances. He grumbled about petty modes of communication—newspapers, the penny post and the telegraph—often employed to convey trivialities. He echoed Emerson's wish for a primal and direct spiritual bonding with the living world that we misleadingly call "nature"—misleadingly because nature extends into human settlements, just as human activity affects virtually every living part of the Earth (Crippen and Cortés 2023). Thoreau's back-to-nature inclinations connect to his philosophy of personal living, and both can be explored within the ancient Chinese concept of *dao*. The word itself is polysemous and can mean "way", "road", "walk", "path", "method" "to speak", "to follow" and more (Xu 2010; Tan and Bao 2022). Though the term is important in diverse branches of Chinese philosophy, it particularly pervades works like the *Daodejing*, which will be a primary focus in this section, but with some attention given to Buddhism and Confucianism.

Various parts of the *Daodejing* (chps. 1, 37, 43, 56, 57) suggest that the genuine *dao* or way is unknowable and nameless, like an uncarved block that gives birth to definable things. The *dao* is beyond conceptualization. To speak of it in straightforward words is to stray crookedly from the path (*dao*), which is one reason why the *Daodejing* communicates in poetical terms. At the same time, the *dao* can be experienced as pervading everything, and it can be followed.

Central to the *Daodejing* (e.g., chps. 2, 12, 60, 63), and pervading much of Chinese philosophy, is the principle of *wu-wei*, which means not just doing what is effortless but adapting appropriately to situations with easy flow. Achieving by doing nothing is an instance: a state leader could do this by not interfering with officials under her, letting people perform according to their strengths, unless guidance is really warranted, in this way optimizing outcomes and generating frictionless harmony (see chp. 12). Acting in accordance with nature can also typify *wu-wei*. A case is an environmental engineer altering the course of a river by placing rocks to subtly change currents, getting the water itself to carve new channels, as opposed to erecting hard barriers, which will often fail anyways. *Wu-wei* is additionally illustrated by negotiating affairs with creative and spontaneous mastery in the absence of reflective planning; or again by the martial artists of fictional legends who exhaust opponents by bending like cloth to strikes and converting the force of blows into counterattacks.

The Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi* [*Chuang-Tzŭ*] (trans. Graham 2001, chp. 3.1), exemplifies many of the just mentioned aspects of *wu-wei* in its well-known parable about Cook Ting. While carving an ox, the cook brandished his blade so that it "never missed the rhythm, now in time with the Mulberry Forest dance". Lord Wen-hui praised his skill, and Cook Ting replied:

> What your servant cares about is the Way [道, the *dao*], I have left skill behind me. When I first began to carve oxen, I saw nothing but oxen wherever I looked. Three years more and I never saw an ox as a whole. Nowadays, I am in touch through the daemonic [神, *shen*, spiritual connection] . . . and do not look with the eye . . . I rely on Heaven's structuring, cleave along the main seams, let myself be guided by the main cavities, go by what is inherently so. A ligament or tendon I never touch, not to mention solid bone . . . Now I have had this chopper for nineteen years, and have taken apart several thousand oxen, but the edge is as though it were fresh from the grindstone. At that joint there is an interval, and

> the chopper's edge has no thickness; if you insert what has no thickness where there is an interval, then . . . there is ample room to move the edge about. That's why after nineteen years the edge of my chopper is . . . fresh . . .

Emerson (1862, p. 502) echoed this passage when he wrote: "You have seen a carpenter on a ladder with a broad axe chopping upward chips from a beam. How awkward! at what disadvantage he works!" But suppose he places "his timber under him. Now, not his feeble muscles, but the force of gravity brings down the axe; that is to say, the planet itself splits his stick. Now that is the wisdom . . . to hitch his wagon to a star, and see his chore done by the gods themselves".

As stated earlier, *dao* can literally connote "walking", and one of Thoreau's better-known essays (1862) bears this title. In it, Thoreau avers perpetual uncertainty as to "whither I will bend my steps" upon leaving for a walk, yet "strange and whimsical as it may seem" allows "instinct to decide" (p. 622). Breezily, he wanders wherever his walk—his way—takes him. This is always Westward, "toward Oregon, and not toward Europe" (p. 622), which means toward East Asia, whether or not he expressly intended this. Echoing the *Daodejing*, however, Thoreau adds that the names of places are meaningless. "You may name it America" where he walks, "but it is not America" (p. 661). That designation captures nothing about the locale. This claim recurs in Thoreau's (1854) *Walden* (pp. 195–96) where he laments the "poverty of . . . nomenclature" that stole from a beautiful "sky water" by calling it "Flint's Pond". The farmer who named it after himself "regarded even the wild ducks which settled in it as trespassers" and "never saw it", "bathed in it, "loved it", "protected it", or "spoke a good word for it".

The *Daodejing* uses natural processes, such as the flow of water into valleys, as a model for following the *dao*, and Thoreau's (1862) "Walking" similarly maintains that "there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright. It is not indifferent to us which way we walk" (p. 622). Daoists are known for revering nature and for having a degree of insolence toward mainstream social conventions. This was again echoed by Thoreau, who opened the essay by declaring a wish "to speak a word for Nature, for absolute Freedom and Wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil" (p. 557). Thoreau felt that society thrusts artificial templates onto life, against the natural flow of things. Just one example from *Walden* is Thoreau's (1854) claim that "we do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us" (p. 92). This is more than an assertion about the brutal labor practices employed to build US railways. Thoreau was also commenting on how railroad timetables regulate people who used to keep their own rhythms. Hence, in his day, doing things "railroad fashion" (p. 118) was an expression that indicated almost unnatural punctuality and precision.

Thoreau's (1854) preference for himself, then, was to adopt an easy and natural flow, and to achieve strength through weakness, as the *Daodejing* advises (chps. 20, 28, 36, 55, 61, 76, 78). A tree that sways with the beat of a storm does better than one that stiffly fights it. Water is supple, but eventually chews through mountains. Compared to adults, babies' bodies are flexible, and their minds capable of branching in vastly more directions. Thoreau, therefore, found himself "regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born" (p. 98), probably because society had weighed him down with so many baseless conventions. He also explained that some of his neighbors regarded him as a well-dressed loafer. But as he elaborated, he worked lightly, thus "wore light shoes and thin clothing, which cost not half so much" (p. 206). Also eating lightly, he did not have to labor hard for his meals; and by not overexerting his body, did "not have to eat hard" (p. 205). Likewise, Thoreau regarded land ownership as a "great encumbrance" (p. 32) since it burdens one with debts and upkeep. He added "herds are the keepers of men" (p. 56), with farmers indentured to their livestock. Wealth is "golden or silver fetters" (p. 16). In all these ways, Thoreau's life philosophy pointed towards effortless action.

These ideas—both Thoreau's and the principle of *wu-wei*—resonate with the tenet that attachments to material things are sources of suffering, especially when cravings are unsatisfied. Such a view shows up across religions, but is especially emphasized in Bud-

dhism and expressed in Chinese scriptures like the *Lotus Sutra* (trans. Watson 1993, chps. 59, 93, 131) and "The Ten Stages" in *The Flower Ornament* (trans. Cleary 1993). Thoreau's criticisms of material attachments mark one place, among others, where he departed from standard libertarian stances about property. He did not go quite so far as to repudiate all rights to it, but he had almost no regard for his own, except in cases when his tax money was to be used to support slavery and war, as Thoreau (1849) made clear in "Resistance to Civil Government".

Thoreau's (1854) indifference to both material goods and his own property repeats in *Walden*. There, he reported not locking his desk or door when gone, so "the tired rambler could rest and warm himself", or "amuse himself with the few books" or "see what was left of dinner" (p. 172). He proclaimed: "beware of all enterprises that require new clothes" (p. 23) and that "our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things" (p. 52). He said "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone", (p. 82), advising to "simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one" (p. 91). He recollected buying land only to have the sellers ask if they could back out. He left them with the land and their money too, yet "retained the landscape" without encumbrance of a "wheelbarrow", thus "got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk" (pp. 82–83). He recalled being terrified by "three pieces of limestone" on his desk because they needed daily dusting when the "furniture of [his] mind was all undusted still". He "threw them out the window in disgust", with this anecdote paralleling the famous Chan (Zen) Buddhist poem by Shenxiu about keeping the mirror of the mind dust free (see McRae 2003, p. 61).

Some of Thoreau's daily pursuits at Walden—gathering firewood and water—recall another celebrated Chan poem about doing the same, attributed to Layman P'ang (trans. Green 2009, chp. 2). Probably more than these activities, Thoreau (1854) loved tending his seven miles of bean rows, which he did not eat, but the work "attached [him] to the earth" (p. 155). He indicated that he was dedicated to it virtually as a ritual practice, in this way connecting a little to Confucian perspectives. He further suggested that it nourished his spirit in ways that even good books could not, with this idea linking to all three Chinese traditions discussed, for reasons that have been partly explained and that will be further elaborated. Yet as much as he loved his beans—and Thoreau dedicated a full chapter to them in *Walden*—he added that sometimes he simply sat "rapt in a revery" from sunrise to sundown (p. 111). In different ways, this anecdote matches aspirations found in Daoism and Buddhism about letting go of abstract thoughts and just experiencing. Except for the fact that Thoreau was here alone, it also gets close to a parable from the *Analects*—a portion that Thoreau in fact translated (Tan 1993), likely while at Walden (Li 2014). This is where Kongzi praises Zengxi's wish to "assemble a company of five or six young men and six or seven boys to go bathe in the Yi River and enjoy the breeze upon the Rain Dance Altar, and then return singing to the Master's house" (trans. Slingerland 2003, 11.26).

4. Social Life and Nature

Emerson (e.g., 1841a) and Thoreau (e.g., 1849) spent considerable time excoriating social customs, whereas Kongzi and Mengzi elevated them. But it ought to be remembered that the two Confucian sages were critics of their society, so did not just accept any kind of ritual. In works like the *Analects* (1.12, 2.3), moreover, one finds a clear rejection of unbendingly rigid adherence to rituals and rules. It should further be kept in mind that Thoreau's (1854) *Walden* has long catalogues of daily habits. Emerson's (1841a) *Self-Reliance* similarly advocates individualistic habits, which is to say, adopting classically American rites in "all the offices and relations", including "religion", "education, "pursuits," "modes of living" and more (pp. 44–45). It may, however, be granted that Transcendentalists concerned themselves less with group harmony than Kongzi and Mengzi, stressing personal dimensions in the interplay between habits and character formation. Yet simultaneously, leading figures in the American movement departed from standard libertarianism in their vital recognition of inescapable social interconnectivity. Emerson and especially Thoreau

quoted and studied Kongzi and Mengzi (Foust 2021), even if working with questionable translations. In light of all this, a case can be made that early Confucian and Transcendental social analysis proceed in at least partly similar ways.

A first point is that while Thoreau spent a great deal of time outside towns, many of his works—even including those about life in the woods like *Walden*—deal extensively with moral philosophy. While he offered ample criticism of the community at large, the book was also moral by virtue of reporting on his multi-year experiment in self-cultivation. As Thoreau (1854, p. 221) put it, "Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own . . . We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones". He here expressed not only the idea that a life can be a sacred artistic project, but that the media are corporeal. His daily embodied bean hoeing habits is one example that would have operated not just to clear his mind, but to cultivate the classic virtues of fortitude and perseverance. Another case in point is that Thoreau spoke admiringly of ancient Indian prescriptions for "how to eat, drink, cohabit, void excrement and urine, and the like, elevating what is mean" and "not falsely . . . calling these things trifles", instead recognizing them as constitutive of etiquette that goes into human character (p. 221).

Developing what we may colloquially call "good habits" relates to effortless action or *wu-wei*. The *Analects* (trans. Slingerland 2003) advises against "coercive regulations" (2.3) and instead suggests: "When it comes to the practice of ritual, it is harmonious ease that is to be valued. It is precisely such harmony that makes the Way [道, *dao*] of the Former Kings so beautiful" (1.12). In other words, when we are habituated to take the appropriate action at the suitable time, it becomes effortless and uncalculated: we do not need to ponder the rule to be followed, potential rewards and punishments, but find ourselves acting nearly automatically. Thus, the same passage (1.12) concludes: "If you merely stick rigidly to ritual in all matters, great and small, there will remain that which you cannot accomplish. Yet if you know enough to value harmonious ease but try to attain it without being regulated by the rites, this will not work either". The easy fluidity that comes with true mastery entails flexible adjustment to situational contours in a largely automatic yet non-reflexive way. The sage does not merely repeat rituals, but deploys them with some latitude. This is analogous to a great boxer, who ducks and weaves in unplanned but innovative ways that are possible only through years of ritualized practice. Ritualized training can be used to teach even things like mathematics, so that we strangely perform best when not explicitly calculating. Ethical behavior, likewise, should not be a matter of calculating, even though Confucians hold that people should be aware of rectitude. Good behavior instead should flow from habitual dispositions to do what is appropriate in a given situation, acting in harmony with it. The ideal is to cultivate "attuned" grace, such that one's impulses, yearnings and "heart's desires" accord with "the bounds of propriety" (2.4).

A second point is that a complex interplay between individualistic and social polarities is expressed in essays like Thoreau's (1849) "Resistance." Throughout this writing, he stresses that institutions are not agents and that only individuals can make differences in the world. The piece also advances negative rights, that is, the view that people are free to do whatever they want, so long as not doing injustice to others, defined as interfering with people's freedom. So, as with other libertarians, Thoreau said if we are not in the causal chain leading to "even the most enormous wrong", we are not personally obliged to dedicate ourselves to its "eradication" (p. 195). But whereas libertarians standardly take the antecedent of the aforesaid conditional for granted, in this way erecting a dividing barrier that shelters them from moral obligation, Thoreau seldom accepts that we are outside causal chains. In his day, he charged Northerners were responsible for Southern slavery because they "co-operate" and thereby participate in various economic and legal supports (p. 193). In addition to fitting with Confucian ideas about individual actions impacting larger social arrangements, Thoreau's outlooks, as will soon be detailed, also gel with the causal holism that pervades multiple East Asian metaphysical systems. This takes the teeth out of the argument (e.g., Cady 1961) that Thoreau's individualism would have

made him wholly antagonistic to a Confucian ethos. However, one may grant that whereas Confucianism regards good social arrangements as preconditions for human flourishing, Thoreau focused more on getting rid of bad ones that thwart personal growth.

A third point to note is that Thoreau (1849) held that certain moral principles follow from nature. The libertarian stress on freedom comes from the observation that fully conscious human agents, by nature, never want exactly the same set of things, so that the only common wish attributable to everybody is the desire to pursue individual interests without interference. Thoreau got more specific, arguing people are not to resign their "conscience to the legislator", indicating respect "for the right" trumps "respect for the law" (p. 190). This is not license to make up one's own morality and do anything since he thought it is self-evident that practices like slavery unjustly interfere with freedom, and with his compatriot Douglass (1852), Thoreau (1849) believed this should be so obvious as to need no further argument. However, too often people surrender their judgment to others, acting "as machines" with "no free exercise whatever of . . . the moral sense", putting "themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well". But "such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens" (p. 191). Thoreau not only highlighted a proclivity to laud the blindly obedient as patriotic, law abiding and so on. He also held that adjudicating moral matters is an importantly human feature that differentiates us from most other species on the planet. He asserted, therefore, that when we cease exercising our conscience, we become less fully human, more like "horses and dogs" (p. 191). In not adjudicating moral issues and acting as if it is all out of our hands, we shirk our duty to uphold justice, "*cost what it may*" (p. 193), whether the payment be economic turmoil or our lives.

Though Thoreau's views parallel many philosophies from around the world, a few Confucian echoes are worth highlighting. First, while Confucians stressed social rituals more than Thoreau would have preferred; and while he would have objected to the idea of creating harmony via rituals that locate people within a hierarchical whole, it should be remembered that the *Analects* (1.12, 2.3) insist on some open flexibility. The text also criticizes governing by means of coercive rules, which might lead people to surrender their conscience to the state. Second, paralleling Thoreau's insistence that we have a duty to do what is right, cost what it may, the *Mengzi* [the *Mencius*] (6A10) indicates that the exemplary person hates unworthiness more than death. Third, as with Thoreau, Kongzi and Mengzi appear to have advanced something on the borders of natural law, specifically maintaining humans naturally incline towards moral goodness. The *Mengzi* (trans. Bloom 2009, 6A2) says: "There is no human being lacking in the tendency to do good, just as there is no water lacking in the tendency to flow downward". But as artificial contrivances can make water travel uphill, bad social convention and ritual can pervert human nature away from the good, which is close to what Thoreau was asserting. Counted among artificial contrivances are exaggerated forms of regulation, with the *Mengzi* (2A2) offering a parable of a man killing grain by yanking it upwards in hopes of making it grow faster (also see Li 2014).

Confucian thinkers were more receptive to refined comforts than what is typical in Chinese Buddhism. At the same time, the *Mengzi* (6A10) records that the sage will always prioritize rightness over luxuries, for doing the reverse diverts moral virtue away from its natural course towards goodness. Buddhists equate material attachments to suffering, because desire produces deprivation or fear of it, entangling one in the rotating wheel of existence, as explained in *The Flower Ornament* (trans. Cleary 1993, p. 746). The same text states: "The origins of worldly ways are all due to attachment" (p. 745), and the enlightened "have no attachment or greed for any objects of desire" (p. 431). We can debate whether Thoreau went this far, but he unequivocally saw acquisitiveness as a burden. A telling anecdote comes from Thoreau's (1862) essay "Walking". There, he recounted surveying swampy land for a man so literally and figuratively "up to his neck and swimming for his life in his property" that above it he might have "written the words which Dante read over the entrance to the infernal regions,—'Leave all hope, ye that enter'" (p. 667).

5. Holism, Metaphysics and Mind

In the last section, I talked about how Chinese ideas about interconnectivity help explain how Thoreau could start with standard libertarian assumptions about minimal moral responsibility, only to conclude that we have enormous duties because we are in the chain leading to injustice. In this section, I elaborate on the theme of interconnectivity, but this time drawing more on various schools of Chinese Buddhism and looking at how they illuminate Transcendental metaphysics and epistemology.

The *Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters* (trans. Kuan 2011, chps. 18–32) as well as the earlier-discussed parable of Indra's bejeweled net (trans. Cleary 1993, chps. 39; trans. Tanabe 1999, p. 473) are just a few entries from Chinese Buddhism, which suggest that entities are interrelationally instantiated. On this account, moreover, an individual thing can be no more constant than its surrounding arrangements, which the *Maharatnakuta Sutra* describes as swirling torrents (trans. Koo et al. 1983, Sutra 21, p. 5). Emerson (1841b, p. 274) advanced a similar idea, remarking that "the universe is fluid and volatile" with "no fixtures in nature", so that "permanence is but a word of degrees". Buddhists derive a corollary from this: if the cosmos and its occupants are always becoming something else, then by virtue of this alone, they are empty, that is, devoid of self-identity. Lack of self-attribute of course also follows from the dependent co-origination of entities and their properties.

Weishi Buddhism is a Chinese branch that stresses that anything we can talk about is a product of the mind, which Xuanzang (trans. Chan 1999, p. 380) argued undergoes constant transformation, always coming into existence as something new, which means continually going out of existence too. Through all this, the "storehouse consciousness" retains a residue or "seeds" from the past that "perfumes" or biases future transformations. Emerson (1844) offered his own version of this when he wrote that "inevitably does the universe wear our color, and every object fall successively into the subject itself" (p. 56). Elsewhere in the same piece: "We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are" (p. 53). He went on: "Perhaps these subject lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects" (p. 54). These passages indicate that Emerson would have appreciated the active dynamics of Weishi and its notion of perfuming. But it should also be noted that his tastes were less skeptical when he stopped theorizing about psychology and focused on practical matters, as in the earlier example of a worker using the force of gravity to split wood.

Prominent in Chinese Huayan Buddhism, Fazang, advanced a causal holism that asserts that "one is all" and "all is one" (trans. Van Norden 2014, p. 88). Elaborating by way of a rafter-building analogy, Fazang states that "the rafter is the building" and "the building is the rafter" (trans. Elstein 2014, pp. 82–83), the idea being each makes one another what they are and so exist because of one another (with Dewey later saying the same about means and ends). This is too strong for Transcendentalists like Thoreau, but he nonetheless inclined towards a kind of ecological holism. He did so in the literal sense of being a natural historian who believed that living things make ecosystems what they are and vice versa. This means living things must be grasped within the ecosystems that define them, as opposed to merely isolating them as specimens to be dissected. He also advanced an ecosocial view that recognized that the atomistic individualism of standard libertarians is hopeless in a world in which nobody acts without affecting others.

The Flower Ornament (trans. Cleary 1993) observes: "All philosophies in the world/Are mental fabrications;/There has never been a single doctrine/By which one could enter the true essence of things" (p. 300). Or again: "Verbal expression has no basis in facts. Furthermore, facts have no basis in words" (p. 462). Or once more: "Things expressed in words/Cannot disclose the character of reality" (p. 379). Fanzang (trans. Cleary 1983, p. 157) adds that this is why Buddhist scripture sometimes communicates in strange ways "far beyond the horizons of speech and thought. It penetrates the trap of words and concepts". A further resonance between Thoreau's thinking and Huayan Buddhism, then, is the shared intuition that reality exceeds what can be captured in ordinary thought and

language; reality is at best expressible in the "timeless" stuff of poetry that requires odd grammars and twisting words precisely because it is beyond ordinary reasoning (Crippen 2015). In this way, there is some consilience with ideas from the *Daodejing*.

In an article published in *The Dial*, Thoreau (1842, p. 40) warned not to "underrate the value of a fact". His comments bring to mind a claim which is regularly made—perhaps too simply—that early Chinese outlooks did not distinguish between facts and values, reality and appearance (e.g., Geaney 2000; Willman 2016). Whether or not overstated, the idea is that the fact of the matter and its value can be the same, for instance, when a community encounters a rampaging buffalo as dangerous. Tiantai Buddhism—a school that Transcendentalists had at least some contact with given that a portion of the *Lotus Sutra* appeared in *The Dial*—advances a tenet that the phenomenal world of appearance is the only world, so by extension real. As the Tiantai sage Zhiyi (trans. Donner 1976, p. 46) remarked: "A single, unalloyed reality is all there is—no entities whatever exist outside of it". On some interpretations, enlightenment within Huayan Buddhism likewise brings awareness that there is no distinction between reality and appearance (Van Norden and Jones 2019).

Many passages penned by Thoreau are evocative of various Buddhist ideas while resonating with Daoist notions, too. For example, Thoreau (1862, p. 672) suggested that the natural world outstrips words and human conventions, remarking that a grove has "no politics" and is indifferent to written deeds, which, know nothing about "the setting sun lighting up the opposite side of a stately pine wood". In *Walden*, Thoreau (1854, pp. 176–77) offered what could be an alternative for the Indra's net metaphor for dependent co-arising. Walden Pond "is blue at one time and green at another . . . Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both. Viewed from a hill-top it reflects the color of the sky, but near at hand it is of a yellowish tint next the shore where you can see the sand, then a light green, which gradually deepens". Sometimes it matches the "vivid green next [to] the shore", but under other circumstances, the hue is that of "changeable silks and sword blades". However, "a single glass of its water held up to the light is as colorless as an equal quantity of air".

Another passage from *Walden* has Thoreau (1854) talking about delighting in "the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad" (p. 304). He chronicled rich colors and textures and how the process is an effect of winter succumbing to spring. He described it in primordial terms of sand flowing "down the slopes like lava, sometimes bursting out through the snow", with this occurring "when the frost comes out in the spring, and even in a thawing day in the winter" (p. 305). Then he characterized it as a microcosm of river formation, noting how "innumerable little streams overlap and interlace one with another" (p. 305). He next narrated the transformation as a living "hybrid product, which obeys half way the law of currents, and half way that of vegetation" (p. 305). He explained: "As it flows it takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines, making heaps of pulpy sprays . . . and resembling . . . some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, of leopards' paws or birds' feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds" (p. 305). He added: "The sun acts on one side firsthand" and less on the opposing "inert bank" (p. 306), which receives less of its warmth. In "the creation of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me" (p. 306). And "when the sun withdraws the sand ceases to flow, but in the morning the streams will start once more . . . and branch again into a myriad of others" (p. 307).

This passage aptly captures a situation of dependent co-origination in a Buddhist sense, and it is also interesting that Thoreau did not arbitrarily distinguish between nature and civilization since the sandbanks are specifically along a railway. It is simultaneously difficult not to glimpse the *Daodejing* (trans. Lau 1972) in Thoreau's words. The ancient text, after all, contains metaphors of earth and sky (*di* 地 and *tian* 天), thawing ice, valleys, estuaries and water carving paths, along with expressions of how the *dao* births, nurtures and transforms the "myriad creatures" (chps. 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 15, 25, 32, 38, 39, 41, 42, 51, 61, 62, 66). Daoism additionally sees *yin* and *yang* as dynamically bringing discernible things into

appearance. For example, presence (*yang*) and absence (*yin*) together comprised the tiny sand fissures that Thoreau described. Movement from cold (*yin*) to warmer (*yang*) seasons likewise trans*formed* the sand banks. A variation of this was the activity (*yang*) or passivity (*yin*) that occurred in opposing mounds depending on how much contact they had with the Sun. Thoreau (1854, p. 318) identified another side of metamorphosis when he spoke of a putrefying animal that was on his daily path. The microbial action and resulting stink, however, gave assurance "of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature", which is "so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed". This, too, recalls the *Daodejing*, which regards "heaven and earth" as "ruthless", never "exhausted" and wont to treat "the myriad creatures as straw dogs" (chp. 5)

If the passages quoted from Thoreau are indicators, then we mainly observe changing realities. But Transcendentalists went farther, foreshadowing the idea that observing things means changing them. Emerson (1836, p. 92) expressed the principle: "Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, molds, makes it . . . Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world . . . Build, therefore, your own world". In the hands of Dewey (1925, p. 259), this proclamation became an anti-skeptical blending of epistemology and ontology that argued that perception and cognition are "qualities of interactions in which both extra-organic things and organisms partake", instead of mere phenomenal representations. Seen from Dewey's (1896, 1925) perspective, which recent enactive cognitive scientists repeat verbatim (see Crippen 2017, 2020), an attribute like glassy smoothness is not in bottles alone nor in brains; it is enacted by fingers caressing over a surface that allows them to glide easily. Dewey (1920, 1929), scales this up to various forms of knowledge gathering, for example, the experimental sciences, since they too reveal reality by introducing changes to it. One difference between Dewey and enactivists, however, is that proponents of the latter are more subject-oriented. This relates to their purported constructivism, which the originators of the movement (Varela et al. 1991) advanced in an overt effort to distinguish themselves from one of their forerunners, Gibson (1966, 1979), who was a self-proclaimed realist. The stress on constructivism also relates to the expressed Buddhist underpinnings of the founding enactivist book, which emphasizes dependent co-origination (Varela et al. 1991).

What Dewey's pragmatism (e.g., 1925) shows, building on his transcendental predecessors, who in turn learned from their Chinese forerunners, is that constructivism and realism need not be at odds. He held, on the one hand, that any reality is necessarily interactional. On the other, when changes are introduced through interactions, the alterations really are there, so that constructivism and realism can mean practically the same thing. This offers less skeptical ways of understanding Weishi claims that worlds are mind dependent. Gibson's (1966, 1979) thesis is that agents encounter action possibilities that accord to their capacities (but exist independently of them), so water has walkable properties for some insects but not for humans, regardless of whether either is present at a given pond. By this same token, because people's embodied situations are not precisely identical, there are at least slight variations between the worlds they encounter. Objectively, a stairway may be closed to an elderly person and open to a teen, just as a bar with sexually aggressive patrons may pose dangers to women that it does not on average to men (Crippen 2022). Looking at this from the standpoint of American pragmatism, which Gibson cites as an influence, one might add that humans mostly generate and hence encounter compatible realities because their similar embodiment means that their interactions with their surroundings have a lot in common. To the extent this is so, people inhabit overlapping worlds, which is why we usually have a basic understanding even with people from other cultures who do not speak our language. Though these illustrations are not expressly religious, they parallel less skeptical Buddhist ideas enough to wonder whether Dewey partly absorbed Asian notions from Transcendentalism before travelling to China. *The Flower Ornament* (trans. Cleary 1993) states: "Because of differences in the force of acts/Living beings' lands are not the same" (p. 243). A little later, it adds: "By the individual acts of beings/These worlds are infinite in kind". (p. 246). Much further on, it concludes: "The

multiplicity of the worlds does not destroy this one world, and the singleness of this world does not destroy the multiplicity of those worlds" (p. 821).

6. Conclusions

This article focused on the mutually implying metaphysics, epistemology and social reasoning found in American Transcendentalism and certain strands of Chinese philosophy. I attended particularly to holistic sides of the *Daodejing*, early Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism, some of which directly influenced Transcendentalists.

One area that Chinese perspectives help clarify is Transcendental social philosophy. To be more specific, an intercultural perspective sheds light on how Transcendentalists could start with radical individualism only to end up stressing extreme culpability on the grounds that acting in one part of the world has repercussions somewhere far away. Thoreau and Emerson also appeared to have adopted or promoted something close to *wu-wei*, both as a practical and spiritual principle. Whether consciously or not, their work mirrors text like the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi.* Thoreau, in particular, found life serenely fulfilling when he rid himself of attachments, which allowed not only for easy flow, but whimsical spontaneity and enjoyment, something valued by Daoists and Confucians if the *Analects*' passage about bathing in the Yi River is to be trusted. There are additional parallels to Confucianism because the sage gracefully does what is harmonious to the situation, as a matter of free-flowing habit. Although Emerson's and Thoreau's views on virtuous habits were partly inspired by their knowledge of ancient Greeks, they read and quoted the *Analects* and the *Mengzi*, so these influences should not be discounted. Another plausible influence is Buddhism since Thoreau (1844, ed.) oversaw the issue of *The Dial* that published a portion of the *Lotus Sutra* which contained discussions about attachment. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that his commentaries about the burdensome nature of attachments closely match Buddhist insights inasmuch as most scriptures from this tradition agree that cravings are sources of suffering and traps that keep people unenlightened (this is also a theme in the Bhagavat Gita, which Thoreau read extensively). The article wrapped up on the theme of interconnectivity, focusing on Daoism and multiple schools of Chinese Buddhism and looking at how they illuminate Transcendental metaphysics and epistemology. Here, the goal was to explain how Transcendentalism and the Chinese influences it absorbs lead to the embodied and anti-skeptical views of American pragmatists, which influence Gibson, who in turn has vastly shaped the course of contemporary cognitive science.

As periodically indicated, there are a wide variety of tributaries in history that might have been followed, and it is possible to tie in strands from Africa, the Middle East, West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and Indigenous cultures from the Americas. My obvious reason for not following all these is there is no space for it in a single paper or even a book, yet this is still the point on which I would like to finish: that cultures have been mixing for millennia. This means in most cases gaining an appreciation of a specific culture entails doing the extremely hard work of adopting a global and historically aware approach.

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Sites of Solitude: Situating the Wilderness of Nature in Wei-Jin Dark Learning and Emerson

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Abstract: For Daoism, the wilderness of nature beyond human society has often been viewed as a site for eremitic retreat in spiritual solitude, a realm where an individual can transcend the limits of social existence. While this tradition flourished in the early medieval Wei-Jin period, Daoism-inspired Dark Learning thinkers of the time also explored ways in which such a realm of solitude could be attained and enjoyed without the necessity of leaving behind the mundane world, an endeavor that has clear parallels with the function of solitude in Emerson's Transcendentalism. This paper focuses on three sites where both Emerson and Dark Learning thinkers located such access to solitude: aesthetic appreciation of nature, metaphysical speculation, and authentic social relationships. In both Emerson and Dark Learning, the universal implications of metaphysical speculation provided a path by which the solitude and independence attainable in the wilderness of nature could be connected to individuals in social life, providing a foundation for ethics outside of traditional authority that led both Emerson and Dark Learning to face similar criticisms from more conservative contemporaries.

Keywords: solitude; nature; Wei-Jin Dark Learning; Emerson; Daoism

1. Introduction

In both Chinese and Western thought, solitude has often been given an ambivalent status as both desirable and suspicious, offering an escape from the vicissitudes of social life and the potential for a more natural mode of existence in the wilderness of nature beyond human society, yet thereby also threatening traditional sources of authority. Such ambivalence is central to the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), whose early work "Nature" (1836) has been described as a "manifesto consecrated to the genius of solitude" (Gonnaud 1987, p. 183), but who came to develop a more subtle appreciation of the interplay between society and solitude in his later works. Likewise, although the Daoist tradition in China beginning with the *Laozi* 老子 represents "one of the earliest and subtlest expositions of the art of philosophical solitude" (Powys 1933, p. 10), and has often been associated with the practice of eremitic reclusion in "the cliffs and caves" (see e.g., Vervoorn 1990), many later threads of Daoism engaged in profound reflections on the function of solitude in society. This paper takes up one of these threads, namely the "Dark Learning" (*xuanxue* 玄學; also referred to as 'Neo-Daoism' or 'literati Daoism') that flourished in the early medieval Wei-Jin period (c. 200–300 CE) just prior to the widespread introduction of Buddhism in China, and examines how thinkers in this tradition used Daoist metaphysical speculation to connect the solitude attainable in the wilderness of nature with Confucian social ethics, thereby developing a form of moral "individualism" (see Yu 1985) that finds many echoes in Emersonian Transcendentalism.

After introducing the connection between solitude and nature in Emerson, the first section outlines how eremitic Daoist tropes concerning solitude in the wilderness were a common theme for escapist imaginative invention among Dark Learning poets such as Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263) and Ji Kang 嵇康 (c. 223–262), reflecting a yearning for a spiritual self-transcendence in the wilderness of nature comparable to that of Emerson and Thoreau,

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and indeed implying a similar consciousness of its limitations in reality. Secondly, "solitude" (*du* 獨) was taken up as a key concept in Guo Xiang's 郭象 (c. 252–312) influential *Zhuangzi* 莊子 commentary, where it expresses not only the unique spiritual reality of the *dao* 道 of nature, but also the singular spontaneous (*ziran* 自然) haecceity of each individual existent at each moment, a transcendental "inherent nature" (*xing* 性), an approach that has clear parallels with the immanent pantheistic tendencies of Emerson's Transcendentalism. Thirdly, the imputed universality of such a metaphysical concept of solitude implies the possibility that, despite its apparent opposition to the social world and its artificial moral codes, it can also be at least partially expressed and captured in human relationships, a possibility taken up by Wei-Jin thinkers' attempts to formulate a distinctive Daoist ethics of authenticity, to which I argue that Guo Xiang also ascribes. Such attempts to find a means of expressing the wild spontaneity of nature on the plane of human existence via metaphysical speculation strongly resonates with Emerson's conception of solitude in society, and the final section of this paper takes up this comparison in considering parallel criticisms of this apparently "antinomian" aspect of both Dark Learning and Emerson, as well as how their parallel trajectories reveal similar attempts to respond to such criticisms with increasingly subtle conceptions of solitude that reflect its ambivalence.

2. Solitude in the Wilderness of Nature

2.1. Emerson on Solitude and Nature

From the famous opening words of his essay "Nature" (1836), Emerson makes clear that his concern with nature is one not only of detached intellectual contemplation or aesthetic enjoyment, but also of spiritual cultivation through an experience of solitude and isolation from the concerns of the human world: "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars" (Emerson 1950, p. 5). As Gonnaud notes, from his time at Harvard onward, solitude in fact became "the supreme means of cultivation" for Emerson (Gonnaud 1987, p. 30). Indeed, it is not only the society of other people that interferes with the purity of solitude he sought, as even being engaged in human cultural practices such as reading and writing implies some form of connection to humanity, and therefore also some degree of separation from nature itself. Instead, Emerson sought a pure, transcendental experience in which the distinction between self and other disappears completely, comparable to and indeed inspired by religious experiences of loss of self and unity with the absolute from Christian *kenosis* (self-emptying) and Plotinus' *henosis* (oneness) to Eastern traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Daoism: "Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (Emerson 1950, p. 6). What Emerson sought from the wilderness of nature then, was primarily a sense of "eternal calm" which has a "medicinal" function for anyone weary of daily life, one in which he "finds himself" (Emerson 1950, pp. 9–10) and experiences "the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable", namely a "harmony" between man and nature as a whole (Emerson 1950, p. 7).

However, as Emerson himself noted, this harmonious relation implies that such an experience of nature, although opposed to the world of ordinary human concerns, is nonetheless still "so pervaded with human life that there is something of humanity in all and in every particular" (Emerson 1950, p. 35). In his 1837 Harvard Divinity School Address, the idealist underpinnings of this view are made even more explicit, namely the "sublime creed" that "the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind; and that one mind is everywhere, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool, active" (Emerson 1950, p. 69). In this sense, then, the solitude Emerson sought in nature was not a sublime experience of being alone in the face of an inhuman, alien and potentially threatening wilderness, but a comforting sense of being at one with a divine nature that is in harmony with humanity's ultimate moral concerns, where one can experience the univer-

sal truth of virtue and benevolence, gaining thereby the feeling that "Whilst a man seeks good ends, he is strong by the whole strength of nature" (Emerson 1950, p. 70), akin to the sense of cosmic righteousness found in Confucian thinkers such as Mencius 孟子 (see e.g., Bloom 2009, p. 30; this moral aspect is discussed in more detail below). Such solitude was thus also not dependent on his isolating himself in a vast pristine wilderness radically separated from the human world, but could equally be found in the "snow puddles" of a simple "bare common" or in the "fields and woods" where one can perceive the "waving of the boughs in the storm" (Emerson 1950, pp. 6–7), a bucolic experience as easily enjoyed in the common ground at the center of Concord villlage or the trees nearby as it would deep in the Appalachian mountains.

Unsurprisingly then, in such an experience, the aspect of nature that was of primary importance to Emerson was not the specific details of its objective structure or functioning, as investigated by modern science, or its wild, radical isolation from the human world, but rather the mystical subjective experience of absorption in unity mentioned above: "When I behold a rich landscape, it is less to my purpose to recite correctly the order and superposition of the strata, than to know why all thought of multitude is lost in a tranquil sense of unity" (Emerson 1950, p. 37). Indeed, even when Emerson describes nature as "a discipline of the understanding in intellectual truths", a "constant exercise in the necessary lessons of difference, of likeness, of order, of being and seeming, of progressive arrangement; of ascent from particular to general; of combination to one end of manifold forces" (Emerson 1950, pp. 20–21), it is not the specific objective facts of such manifold variety that interest him, but rather how they express a "moral law" that "lies at the center of nature and radiates to the circumference", a "moral sentiment" that "scents the air, grows in the grain, and impregnates the waters of the world" (Emerson 1950, pp. 23–24). Emerson's foregrounding of this subjective aspect of our experience of nature as permeated by human, moral value, which he shared with other idealist and Romantic thinkers of the 19th century, clearly demonstrates that, unlike the modern movement of environmentalism with its anti-anthropocentric tendencies, his primary concern with nature lay not in the value of nature "in-itself", but rather with the benefits of nature for human life through the solitude it can provide.

This aspect of Emerson's thought concerning nature is clearly evident in the divergences between his views and thinkers with more concern for the natural world in itself, regardless of the uses or abuses to which it can be put by humanity. In an 1872 letter to renowned naturalist and pioneer of environmentalism John Muir (1838–1914), whom he had met in California the year before, Emerson chided Muir for his fondness for solitude and skepticism about human society as a whole, noting that "there are drawbacks also to Solitude, who is a sublime mistress, but an intolerable wife", and exhorting Muir to "bring to an early close your absolute contracts with any yet unvisited glaciers or volcanoes" (Emerson 1997, p. 442). Similarly, although Henry David Thoreau's (1817–1862) growing interest in nature was influenced by Emerson and his Transcendentalism, Emerson himself disapproved of "the hermit Thoreau" for "refusing to vote and for visiting town only for his mother's cooking" (Woodward-Burns 2016, p. 43), thereby neglecting to actively apply the moral lessons and spiritual cultivation attained in his experience of nature to improve human society. Thoreau's revelatory experience in *Walden* that "the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object", making "the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant" (Thoreau 2004, pp. 127–28), indeed seems to capture exactly the kind of more radical detachment from society that Emerson found morally unacceptable. These relatively minor disagreements in many ways echo debates among ancient Chinese thinkers, especially those seen as representing Confucianism and Daoism, and thus constitute important points to consider in any engagement between his thought and traditional Chinese thought.

2.2. Solitude and Nature in Daoism and Wei-Jin Dark Learning

Despite the relative lack of translated material from China in his time, Emerson himself was already aware of the prominence of solitude and nature in Chinese culture, specifically as expressed in the by now well-researched phenomenon of "hermits" (*yinshi* 隱士) in "reclusion" (*yinyi* 隱逸), seeking "a solitary retreat in a tranquil and beneficent wilderness, a timeless moment beyond the dust and din of the mundane world" (Berkowitz 1993, p. 575). However, given the fact that "[D]aoism exercised almost no influence in the West during the time of the Transcendentalists" (Versluis 1993, p. 42), Emerson was primarily aware of this aspect through its expression in the Confucian tradition, from which the more distinctively Daoist aspects of reclusion only later became differentiated in the West.

In early Chinese texts, tropes of reclusion frequently concerned what can be termed "moral reclusion", i.e., a virtuous individual's retreat from society into nature as a protest against or rejection of a corrupt society, as paradigmatically depicted in *Analects* 論語 18.8, in which Confucius 孔子 discusses seven prominent historical examples of "men who went into seclusion" and thereby "remained pure" to varying degrees, then goes on to distinguish himself from all of them since, unlike them, he has "no preconceived notions of what is permissible and what is not", i.e., no fixed view on the question of social service or reclusion (Slingerland 2003, pp. 218–19; on moral reclusion, see Berkowitz 1992). This text clearly implies the existence of other individuals who *did* have such preconceived notions, i.e., those who were in favor of serving rulers without regard for their morality, and those who were more absolute in their rejection of society and desire for reclusion, with the latter counting as more "pure" examples of hermits. While the *Analects* does include apocryphal references to figures who might represent the latter view, such as the three farming men in 18.6 and 18.7, Confucius rejects these by arguing that "A person cannot flock together with the birds and the beasts" (Slingerland 2003, p. 217), much as Emerson would later argue to Muir and Thoreau, clearly demonstrating his default preference for social life and reluctance to leave it behind for good unless absolutely necessary.

For examples of what such reclusive figures in early China might *themselves* have thought about reclusion, we can look for references to solitude and nature in early Daoist texts. In chp. 20 of the *Laozi* 老子, the normally invisible author suddenly offers a poetic account of his feeling of being alone, alienated, and different from the "multitude" or "common people" (*zhongren* 眾人, *suren* 俗人):

> "Common people are clearly obvious, but I alone am cryptically obscure.
>
> Common people are meticulously discriminating, but I alone muddle everything together.
>
> Floating indifferently, oh, as if out on the sea; blown about by the wind, oh, I seem to have no place to stop.
>
> Common people all would have purpose, but I alone am doltish and rustic.
>
> I alone with to be different from others, and so value drawing sustenance from the mother". (Lynn 1999, pp. 84–85)

Although this passage does not explicitly reference reclusion in nature, and has been interpreted as expressing the ideal attitudes of the detached "Daoist sage ruler" (Moeller 2007, p. 50), its references to solitude, wandering, and drawing sustenance from the *dao* 道 of nature, along with passages in the *Laozi* discussing processes of decay and corruption in society (e.g., chp. 18, 38), mean that it can be understood more broadly to express a general psychological and indeed physical state, one of separation and detachment from the ordinary human world and its common values.

While such passages from the *Laozi* require some interpretive work to connect them directly to specific aspects of solitude and reclusion, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 makes such connections explicit, with Zhuangzi himself having been described as "aside from Confucius . . . the single most important figure in the history of Chinese eremitism", and in particular the one who did the most to transform reclusion from a resigned response to "adverse circumstance" into "the highest ideal to which a man can aspire" (Vervoorn 1990, pp. 55–56).

However, while oft-quoted anecdotes such as the story of the mythical "Divine man" (*shenren* 神人) living on Guye Mountain who "does not eat the five grains but only imbibes the wind and drinks the dew" (chp. 1 "Free and Distant Wandering"; Lynn 2022, p. 12) and the account of Zhuangzi's famous preference to "drag my tail in the mud" like a tortoise rather than accept an invitation to serve in the administration of a state (chp. 17 "Autumn Floods"; Lynn 2022, p. 324) clearly reflect ideals of solitary reclusion and spiritual cultivation in nature, other passages in the text problematize any attempt to portray Zhuangzi as a proponent of eremitic reclusion in the wilderness. For example, the opening of chp. 15 "Honing the Will" lists various categories of scholars who retreat from the world out of moral condemnation, idle leisure or desire for longevity, all of which are regarded as inferior to the "virtue of the sage" who effortlessly achieves a tranquil impartiality without need for such deliberate withdrawal (Lynn 2022, pp. 294–95). Similarly, chp. 20 "The Mountain Tree", which like chp. 1 contains several anecdotes concerning the virtues of uselessness, opens with a passage that explicitly undermines any attempt to simply replace the common focus on social usefulness with an endorsement of the uselessness of reclusion, instead arguing that one who truly "wanders together with the First Ancestor of the myriad things" as depicted in the above passage from the *Laozi* is "Free from praise and censure, now a dragon, now a snake; he transforms with the moment, unwilling to be any one particular thing; now increasing now decreasing, he forms his size in harmonious accord" (Lynn 2022, p. 354). Such statements clearly resonate with Confucius' own reluctance to take any fixed position on reclusion, as noted above, albeit with the *Zhuangzi* displaying a greater focus on the aspect of avoiding trouble through flexible accommodation rather than on reflecting the complexities of real-life situations in applying moral principles.

As Vervoorn notes, this more subtle position is one in which reclusion is not abandoned, but rather transformed into "a type of hiding that takes place within society rather than outside it", one concerned with "making oneself invisible by doing away with any outstanding characteristics or abilities" (Vervoorn 1990, p. 58). This form of reclusion would have a far-reaching influence on later Chinese thought, especially in the Han and Wei-Jin dynasties, where the concept of "eremitism at court" developed, enabling scholar-officials to claim the same spiritual detachment and transcendence as a Daoist hermit while enjoying the benefits of social position and high office (see Vervoorn 1990, pp. 203–27; Jia 2015). Reflecting this development, in the Wei-Jin dynasties, which have been described as "the golden age of Chinese eremitism" (Vervoorn 1990, p. viii; Berkowitz 1993, p. 578), while there were still "true" hermits who left society behind to live in the mountains, these frequently appear as a literary trope and spiritual ideal for literati rather than a practical choice.

A good example of this relation can be seen in the two opening tales concerning hermits in chp. 18 "Reclusion and Disengagement" of *A New Account of Tales of the World* 世說新語, in which two key figures of Dark Learning, Ruan Ji and Ji Kang, are both depicted as "wandering in the mountains" and briefly meeting hermit-like figures with mystical abilities or wisdom (Liu 2002, pp. 354–56). Here, although Ruan and Ji's appreciation for and fascination with a life of solitude "riding alone wherever his fancy led him, not following the roads or byways, to the point where carriage tracks would go no further" (Liu 2002, pp. 354–55) is made clear, they themselves did not commit to such a way of life, but rather inevitably returned to society, where Ji would eventually be put to death for his outspokenness while Ruan found ways to hide himself amidst the surrounding social pressures, as suggested in the *Zhuangzi*. The attraction that solitude in nature held for them was then primarily expressed through the aesthetic imagination of their poetry, in what has been called a "mystical escapism" (Balazs 1964, pp. 236–42) or "ecstatic exploration of the otherworld" (Kohn 1992, pp. 96–108). As Holzman points out, although Ruan was certainly "tempted by the pursuit of immortality, profoundly attracted by the mystical bliss that the immortals enjoyed far from the world of men", in his poetry, he generally used such images "more as allegorical symbols than as expressions of his 'innermost thoughts'" (Holzman 1976, p. 153). Similarly, while solitude is a frequent theme of his po-

ems, the most extreme of which even "raised his loneliness to metaphysical proportions" and portray him as "absolutely alone in the entire universe", this finally only served to demonstrate "his complete disillusionment with society as he actually saw it about him", and thus paradoxically how "profoundly attached" he was to social life (Holzman 1976, pp. 134–36).

As for Ji Kang, his poetry frequently expresses a similar yearning "to ride the cloud and roam the Eight Extremes" with Daoist immortals (Owen and Swartz 2017, p. 321), and his appreciation for the natural wilderness is even more prominent in texts such as his extended lyric depiction of mountains and rivers in his "Rhapsody on the Zither" 琴賦:

> "Dark ridges, precipitous bluffs,
>
> Towering and tall, jagged and jutting,
>
> Crimson cliffs fall sharply downward,
>
> Verdant walls rise ten thousand fathoms high.
>
> Then layered peaks rise one above another,
>
> Surging so high they seem covered by clouds.
>
> From afar, they tower over all in supreme might;
>
> Lofty crests burgeon forth in singular splendor . . .
>
> Men wander and linger about in it for its natural divine beauty, which suffices to arouse adoration and delight". (Owen and Swartz 2017, pp. 361–65).

While such poems seem to take the wilderness of nature as possessing an inherent value, other texts show how Ji regarded his aesthetic conception and "taste for independence" as largely a product of his own liberal upbringing, "aggravated" by his reading *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* (Henricks 1983, p. 7), which led him to regard attaining the kind of "detached ease" required for practicing eremitism at court as something that "would indeed be hard for me, since it is not what my heart likes" (Owen and Swartz 2017, p. 331). In this sense, despite his evident love of the wilderness, Ji in fact also acknowledged the superiority of the court-eremitism ideal, but simply thought himself unable to accept it due to his own limitations, which had left him with an excessively headstrong nature and a reluctance to compromise his desire for transcendence by confronting it with a harsh social reality. He therefore felt he had no choice but to "pluck my zither and raise a lone song" in the hope that "there are those who can follow me" (ibid.), as happened when Ji's charismatic example led to the group of "the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove" gathering around him in the "political refuge" of Shanyang (see Lo 2015, pp. 430–32). As will be discussed in more detail below, this attempt to "create a perfect and secure private society in the face of chaos and upheaval in the world at large" (Kohn 1992, p. 101) can also be seen as demonstrating that what Ji in fact desired was, rather than the pristine solitude of nature, primarily a more authentic form of social life that would not demand he repress his more outspoken and idiosyncratic tendencies.

From the above, it can be seen that even Dark Learning thinkers such as Ruan Ji and Ji Kang, who are usually regarded as the most extreme in their rejection of social norms and desire for spiritual transcendence in the wilderness, in fact combined aspects of Daoist and Confucian views of solitude and nature, valuing these at least partly as a result of their disillusionment with the decaying society in which they found themselves, with which the apparent beauty and harmony of nature provided a stark contrast. In this, their views can be fruitfully compared with those of Emerson, who recognized how "As we degenerate, the contrast between us and our house is more evident", leading us to become "strangers in nature" who "do not understand the notes of birds" and are feared and attacked by wild animals (Emerson 1950, p. 36), a conception that could have been lifted directly from the account of how the "world of perfect virtue" where "people lived together with the birds and beasts" and "joined in kinship with the myriad creatures" fell into decline in chp. 8 "Horses' Hooves" of the *Zhuangzi* (Lynn 2022, p. 193). Like Emerson, however, their idealized view of a prelapsarian state of nature was tempered by an acceptance that

society could and indeed *should* be able to express such ideals, albeit with Emerson being able to see the potential for assisting in such political transformation in his own society, while Ruan and Ji only saw the option of lamenting the state of the world and seeking to preserve an alternative in Shanyang.

3. Metaphysical Solitude

For both Emerson and Wei-Jin Dark Learning then, the virtues of the solitude possible in nature should ideally be able to be located not only in literary fantasy or actual eremitic reclusion, but anywhere, including in society itself, and both sought to base an account of such possibilities on a metaphysical conception of human nature in which individuals can to varying degrees gain access to and express nature as a whole.

In Emerson, such a view is most clearly expressed in his 1841 essays "Self-Reliance" and "The Over-Soul", both of which fully reflect the immanent, pantheistic, and indeed quasi-Spinozistic tendencies of his conception of God and nature. In "Self-Reliance", Emerson does not merely describe the empirical virtues of self-reliance and life in nature, as might be found in, e.g., Thoreau's depictions of life in solitude in *Walden* (e.g., Thoreau 2004, pp. 125–34), but attempts to raise such practical solitude up to a metaphysical or ontological level: "We must go alone . . . But your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation" (Emerson 1950, pp. 159–60). Such elevation aims at realizing the eternal perfection that was traditionally attributed to God or nature as a whole in all individual existents, such that each is able to share in this beatitude. Emerson here sees this as the case even for flowers, which he views as possessing an inherent self-satisfaction with their own being: "There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence . . . Its nature is satisfied and it satisfies nature in all moments alike" (Emerson 1950, p. 157). However, while existents such as flowers naturally and spontaneously possess such a quality, Emerson views humanity as having lost this due to the "degeneration" mentioned above, descending into what he calls "the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times" (Emerson 1950, p. 153). Already in "Nature", he had described this "corruption of man" as happening "When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires—the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise—and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth" (Emerson 1950, p. 17). The key message of "Self-Reliance" is thus that such alienation from natural simplicity can be reversed, since even where it is occluded by the above artificialities, human individuals nonetheless still latently possess the inherent metaphysical independence of the rose and all other entities, and therefore are able to return to a true state of being in which they are united with nature and creation as a whole: "a true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the center of things. Where he is, there is nature . . . Character, reality, reminds you of nothing else; it takes place of the whole creation" (Emerson 1950, pp. 153–54).

If "Self-Reliance" already elevates the status of human individuals to a spiritual level, even if only potentially, "The Over-Soul" pushes this to an extreme, and in particular focuses on the fact that such unity between individuals and the whole can only be attained at the level of the soul, such that the objective phenomena of nature themselves are reduced in importance in relation to the immortality in which the soul is able to partake. For Emerson here, where our ordinary experience of phenomena is fragmentary and divided, such that "We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles", we nonetheless also have direct access to the whole of nature, with all the eternal perfection this implies: "Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE" which is "self-sufficing and perfect in every hour" (Emerson 1950, p. 262). Since such unity is always present, as "the individual soul always merges with the universal soul" (Emerson 1950, p. 270), its realization simply requires that one open oneself to this immanent voice, to enter into a state in which "The soul gives itself, alone, original and pure, to the Lonely, Original and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads and speaks through it" (Emerson 1950, p. 277), echoing

the Plotinian "flight of the alone to the Alone" (see e.g., Corrigan 1996). The mystical overtones of this state make it perhaps unsurprising that, although Emerson describes such unity as one in which "the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one" (Emerson 1950, p. 262), he nonetheless goes on to note that it has narcissistic tendencies that imply a neglect of the objective and ephemeral realities of natural phenomena: "I, the imperfect, adore my own Perfect. I am somehow receptive of the great soul, and thereby I do overlook the sun and the stars and feel them to be the fair accidents and effects which change and pass" (Emerson 1950, p. 277). Such metaphysical solitude is thus in many ways even more extreme than the solitude in nature described above, tending towards the "pure immanence" of "the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name" proposed by Gilles Deleuze in his final essay (see Deleuze 2001, p. 29), and perhaps reflecting the alleged "character of pagan mystical thought" such as that of Plotinus: "self-absorbed, solitary, narcissistic, and world-renouncing" (Corrigan 1996, p. 28).

Even from this brief summary, some similarities between Emerson's view and Daoism should be obvious, in particular the depiction of a decline from a prelapsarian state of natural perfection to a world corrupted by human artificiality and excess, which as suggested above are near-omnipresent themes in both the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. Like Emerson, the *Laozi* also responds to such decline and fragmentation by proposing a form of "reversion" (*fan* 反) or "return" (*fugui* 復歸), such as the sage returning to the undivided "uncarved block" (*pu* 樸) of the *dao* as a whole in chp. 28 (Lynn 1999, p. 103), and how the myriad things each "flourish" yet eventually return to their "root" (*gen* 根) of emptiness and quietude in chp. 16 (Lynn 1999, pp. 75–76). In both these cases, this return implies a reduction or elimination of excessive desire and thus the attainment of a form of inherent self-satisfaction through unity with the eternal *dao* which, like Emerson's Over-Soul, lacks nothing and "stands alone, unchanged" (*duli bugai* 獨立不改) in chp. 25 (Lynn 1999, p. 94). Combining these statements with those from chp. 20 quoted in Section 2.2 above, it is thus implied that, in attaining such unity, the things that return also gain a form of spiritual solitude, sharing in the aloneness of the *dao*, although this is not stated as explicitly as in Emerson.

Such a view is stated slightly more directly in chp. 6 "The Great Exemplary Teacher" of the *Zhuangzi*, where an account of the key stages in the study of the *dao* includes "putting things outside oneself" (*waiwu* 外物), perceiving "perfect independence" (*du* 獨; lit. "solitude", "aloneness"), and then achieving a state of eternity with no past or present (Lynn 2022, p. 140) like that of Emerson's roses, who "make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them" (Emerson 1950, p. 157). However, it is made most explicit in Wei-Jin scholar Guo Xiang's influential commentary on the *Zhuangzi*, and in particular its distinctive and much-discussed concept of "lone-transformation" (*duhua* 獨化; see Ziporyn 2003, pp. 99–123; translated as "independent transformation" in Lynn 2022). This term is often understood as a primarily ontological concept, referring to the way in which all individual existents (*you* 有) exist and transform "independently" without any ontological dependence on either one another or a more fundamental ground or substance, a form of "ontological individualism" in which he is frequently accused of forgetting or denying the Heideggerian ontological difference between Being/*dao* and beings/things (see Shen 2013, p. 177). However, as Ziporyn notes, Guo clearly "acknowledges the mutual interaction of things, and even that they need one another in order to be what they are" (Ziporyn 2003, p. 105), and he also explicitly affirms the existence of *dao* as distinct from things in his *Laozi* commentary (see Gao 2022), both of which problematize any attempt to portray Guo as simply denying *dao* altogether, as most notably argued by Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (see Feng 2001, pp. 516–25).

Considered in the context of the discussions of solitude above, it should perhaps be more obvious that Guo's concept of "lone-transformation" should be understood not primarily as an ontological theory, but also and even primarily as expressing an ideal *subjective state* of existents, one in which they are "alone" in the Emersonian sense of possessing

an inherent self-satisfaction with their own being due to unity with nature as a whole, as in Guo's related concept of "self-fulfilment" or "spontaneous attainment" (*zide* 自得), which appears over 100 times in his commentary. Such a view is consistent with examples found in early Daoist texts such as the two "Techniques of the Mind" 心術 chapters of the *Guanzi* 管子, in which we read that "when [the mind] is calm, it can concentrate; when it concentrates, solitude (*du* 獨) is established; once it is in solitude, it can be clear, and once it is clear, it can be numinous" (see Rickett 1998, p. 76, where *du* is translated as "detached"), in which the term cannot plausibly be interpreted in ontological terms, but clearly refers to a psychological or spiritual state of unity with *dao*. This usage is also continuous with the later Song-Ming Neo-Confucian interpretation of the Confucian concept of "care for solitude" (*shendu* 慎獨), which was often understood by mainstream pre- and post-Song-Ming Confucian commentators as referring to self-discipline when one is physically alone and not being watched by others, following Han dynasty commentaries. More recent excavated texts have, however, shown that the Neo-Confucian interpretation, which Du Weiming 杜維明 describes as referring to a return to "the essential 'solitariness'—the singularity, uniqueness, and innermost core—of the self" before one comes into contact with external things and emotions are aroused (Tu 1989, p. 109), was in fact probably closer to the original meaning, which was glossed as "casting aside external sensations" (*sheti* 舍體) (Liang 2014, p. 307).

On this interpretation then, Guo's notion of "lone-transformation" is inseparable from his controversial understanding of the *Zhuangzi*'s "free and distant wandering" (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊), which he also interprets as referring to a self-satisfied, self-sufficient but relative subjective state that all existents are in principle capable of sharing, as opposed to the later views of e.g., Buddhist monk Zhi Daolin 支道林 (314–366), Buddhism-inspired Neo-Confucian Lin Xiyi 林希逸 (c. 1193–1270) and many modern scholars such as Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢, all of whom insist that it should refer only to an ideal state of absolute spiritual transcendence only attainable by the perfected Daoist sage, and thus something that can only be a goal for spiritual cultivation (see Machek 2010; Liu 2015, p. 211). On Guo's view, such an ideal state, which he also describes as having "no mind" (*wuxin* 無心) is instead something that we inherit originally from nature, and which we can only attain by returning, rather than striving forward, as he notes in a comment on chp. 11 "Leave Things Alone": "The Earth has no mind, so since I am born from that which has no mind, I should again guard such state of no mind and carry on alone" (Lynn 2022, p. 217). The fact that Emerson explicitly attributes such a state to ordinary natural existents such as roses, and indeed regards humans as in some sense uniquely responsible for corrupting this original state with artificial interference, clearly suggests that his notion of metaphysical solitude is, in this respect, closer to that of Guo than the more absolute versions proposed by later commentators.

4. Solitude and Social Authenticity

As the controversy over Guo Xiang's "free and distant wandering" suggests, there is an essential ambiguity in his subtle conception of metaphysical solitude, one that can also be found in Emerson, and that concerns the concrete implications of "merging" (or "vanishing" [*ming* 冥] in Guo's terms) the singular or individual into the whole or universal. For Guo, these implications are obviously and fundamentally dependent on the inherent nature (*xing* 性) of the individual concerned: since sages possess a perfectly placid and limpid inherent nature, their merging implies being empty of any partiality or dependence (*wudai* 無待) and thus being able to adapt to any external environment, as in the dragon-like ability to transform with the moment in the *Zhuangzi* mentioned in Section 2.2 above. For all other non-sagely existents, however, such "merging" is necessarily relativized and dependent (*youdai* 有待) on various internal (their own unique inherent nature and character) and external (being able to satisfy their basic needs and desires, finding a suitable position in society, etc.) factors, such that they are only able to achieve such a state under certain conditions (see Lynn 2022, pp. 6–9). For the latter group, Guo is absolutely clear that they

cannot change their inherent natures, and must be authentic to it: "to try to change one's basic nature is to reject the thing one is. To be a thing and yet try not to be that thing, if this does not lead to disaster, what does!" (Lynn 2022, p. 433). Clearly, these implications are directly connected to various questions concerning solitude and nature discussed above, such as Ji Kang's inability to compromise his desire for transcendence, and the question of whether or not a "medicinal" experience of solitude in nature is necessary in order to clear one's mind of social alienation.

In Emerson, a similar issue can be noted: while his account of becoming a selfless "transparent eyeball" of nothingness through which the currents of nature can pass seems to echo the perfect limpidity of the Daoist sage, his later discussions in "Self-Reliance" and other texts advocate a much more solid and concrete notion of authenticity and self, one in which retaining one's unique individual character is supreme and conformity with the world is anathema: "No law can be sacred to me but that of my own nature" (Emerson 1950, p. 148). For him, there can be no perfectly balanced nature like that of the sage, since "Nature sends no creature, no man into the world without adding a small excess of his proper quality" (Emerson 1950, pp. 414–15). Indeed, Emerson's interest in solitude in nature is at least partly premised on the fact that "the voices which we hear in solitude" provide us with "an independent, genuine verdict" that is unencumbered by the "consequences" and "interests" that plague social life (Emerson 1950, pp. 147–48). Interestingly, according to the account given in his preface to the *Zhuangzi*, Guo Xiang regarded Zhuangzi himself as precisely one of these genuine voices from outside the ordinary social world who never kept his "wild talk" to himself, and therefore judged him as not achieving the "canonical" status of records of selfless sages, yet nonetheless being "still the absolute best of all the non-canonical philosophers" (Lynn 2022, p. 565). As Versluis argues, however, the difference between Emerson's two descriptions of self in "Nature" and "Self-Reliance" should not be overstated, and the same is true for Guo's account of non-sages. Even where he focused on the distinctive character of each individual, Emerson like Guo still emphasized the importance of transcending the narrow-mindedness of the ordinary self: "in Emerson's works, self-transcendence is central to self-actualization. Without transcending the passional ego, the true self cannot be revealed" (Versluis 1993, p. 67). As discussed above, it is here that the "medicinal" function has a central role to play.

Furthermore, as scholars have previously noted, a gradual shift can be seen in Emerson's work, one in which, while he retained his early advocation of solitude and nature, he became increasingly concerned with how to apply the authentic voice of solitude in social affairs (see e.g., Gonnaud 1987; Woodward-Burns 2016). A suggestion of the direction Emerson took can be seen in "Self-Reliance" (1841), when he states that "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (Emerson 1950, p. 150). Here, it is not solitude itself that is valuable, but rather the independence of mind that it offers. For one who is able to retain this, recourse to actual solitude in nature would presumably be unnecessary. In "The Transcendentalist" around the same time, Emerson was concerned precisely with justifying the presence of such great men in society, offering a plea for society to "tolerate one or two solitary voices in the land, speaking for thoughts and principles not marketable or perishable" (Emerson 1950, p. 103), again implying that it is the authenticity and independence of solitude and its social role that was his primary concern. Indeed, it was against this background in 1843 that Emerson transcribed the *Analects* passage containing Confucius' "birds and beasts" argument against reclusion (*Analects* 18.6; quoted in Section 2.2 above) under the heading "Reform", and as Versluis notes, "the Confucian ideal of the ethical, solitary, learned, and decorous man certainly appealed to Emerson's sense of himself in the face of all the retreats from society in which the other Transcendentalists engaged" (Versluis 1993, pp. 70–71). By the time of his late work *Society and Solitude* (1870), Emerson was directly stating that "Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal", and arguing that one must instead make a "diagonal line" between the two, since "Society and solitude are deceptive names. It is not the

circumstance of seeing more or fewer people, but the readiness of sympathy, that imports" (Emerson 1950, pp. 745–46). Where a society could afford such sympathy, there would apparently no longer be a need for solitude.

The development of Dark Learning in the Wei-Jin period has often been viewed as following a course comparable to this, from a "confrontation" between traditional "conformity" or the "teaching of names" (i.e., the Confucian code of social morality) and the new individualist doctrine of "naturalness" or "spontaneity" (Daoism, as interpreted in Dark Learning) in the early period to a final synthesis achieved by Guo Xiang (see Mather 1969). A common interpretation of this is that, while the early period of Dark Learning represented by e.g., Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE), Ruan Ji and Ji Kang advocated a liberating form of what Mather describes as a quasi-Existentialist "'situation ethics,' in which no preexistent or prescriptive framework circumscribes the individual's free choice of what is right for the immediate situation" (Mather 1969, p. 165), later thinkers such as Xiang Xiu 向秀 (c. 221–280) and Guo Xiang designed their ideas as a compromise in which "the paradoxes and tensions between officialdom and eremitism, having the Way and lacking the Way, court and mountain, wealth and poverty, and life and death were wiped out", since "Scholar-officials no longer had to make a choice between opposites. They simply followed their calling to take officialdom and serve society, while keeping a carefree, detached mind" (Jia 2015, p. 554). To some degree, this latter view imputed to Guo finds an echo in Moeller and D'Ambrosio's postmodern interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* as advocating a "genuine pretending" that is able to survive and indeed flourish as a "joker card" or "smooth operator" in any social situation, including the Confucian officialdom of the Western Jin dynasty, as opposed to any notion of Existentialist authenticity or Confucian sincerity (see Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017).

While support for such a view can indeed be found in the *Zhuangzi* itself as noted above, in relation to Guo, it neglects his crucial distinction between the sage and the non-sage, as well as his praise for Zhuangzi's genuine voice as noted above, and his own reported outspokenness. For Guo, the flexibility to accord with any situation is a property embodied by the *sage*, and not by others, who are inevitably limited in countless ways by their own individual idiosyncrasies, and thus unable to "vanish" smoothly into an infinite multiplicity of different situations. To demand that non-sages nonetheless strive to do so would precisely be to impose a preexistent or prescriptive moral framework onto their conduct, one that would be in many ways more exacting and restrictive than the traditional Confucian morality it aims at replacing, effectively demanding that all individuals eradicate all individual preference and become simply faceless and interchangeable "joker cards". In relation to solitude then, Guo attempts to allow a space for individuals to locate their own "diagonal line" between solitude and official service, opposing any attempt to impose a unified moral code onto the world. Such a view is more in line with earlier Wei-Jin thinkers who also endorsed a notion of authenticity and individuality, albeit one that retains a space for the sage's unique form of empty authenticity alongside a more substantial form similar to that found in Emerson.

5. Antinomian Arguments

Given the similarities between the notions of solitude and its connection to forms of authenticity found in Emerson and Dark Learning, it is perhaps unsurprising neither that the latter like the former has been described as an "individualism" (see Yu 1985), nor that both have frequently been targeted for criticism in this respect by proponents of more traditional and conservative social moral codes, especially as both placed significant value on the outspokenness of "genuine voices" as opposed to social conformity. Nonetheless, the specific arguments in these respects differed in important ways.

Emerson's controversy was primarily based on the self-evident pantheistic and rationalistic tendencies of his thought, which, like that of Spinoza before him, was thus seen as a threat to traditional religious authority and "a slippery slope to atheism", implying as it did a critique of the miraculous claims of "historical Christianity" (Buell 2003, p. 161).

However, as Buell notes, while Andrews Norton's critique followed these lines, comparing Emerson as the "latest form of infidelity" to the allegedly atheistic tendencies of Spinoza and Hume (see Norton 1839), other responses to his notorious Divinity School Address at Harvard focused not on his humanistic critique of orthodox religion, but rather on the "impersonal" and "inhuman" aspects of his new form of spirituality, with its accompanying connections to Eastern religions (Buell 2003, pp. 165–69). In such critiques, it was Emerson's denial of anthropomorphism with its anthropocentric concern for humanity that was most unacceptable, since it apparently removes humanity from its position of centrality within nature. From Emerson's perspective, however, "Depersonalization was indispensable to a truly privatized spirituality" (ibid.), since only an impersonal spirituality based on that which is common to all could avoid the danger of "antinomianism", which Emerson knew would arise: "The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard, and mere antinomianism; and the bold sensualist will use the name of philosophy to gild his crimes" (Emerson 1950, p. 161).

Emerson's concerns about antinomianism and abuse are mirrored in criticisms directed at Dark Learning by Confucian critics such as Pei Wei 裴頠 (267–300), who argued in his essay "On the Exaltation of Existence" 崇有論 that, since Dark Learning thinkers followed Daoism in diminishing the value of the social world and seeking to transcend it, they would inevitably end up neglecting moral codes and ritual propriety, and thus be left with a situation in which "there is then no means of governing left" (Balazs 1964, p. 252). As with antinomianism in Emerson's time, Pei's concern here was exactly that a "rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard", rather than an attempt to seek a standard outside of orthodox tradition, and like Emerson himself, Dark Learning thinkers responded by arguing that the tradition itself had betrayed its original meaning and been reduced to mere "traces" (*ji* 跡) of its original spirit. Responding to the decline in social cohesion at the end of the Han dynasty, the Confucianism of the Wei-Jin period as represented by figures such as Pei, Fu Yi 伏義 in his debate with Ruan Ji (see Holzman 1976, pp. 82–87), or Fu Xuan 傅玄 (217–278) in his *Fuzi* 傅子 was primarily focused on manipulating instruments such as social reputation and material reward to organize society, as proposed by Xunzi 荀子 and Legalism in accordance with their more skeptical and realistic conception of human nature as inherently self-interested. In this respect, more idealistically-minded Dark Learning thinkers such as Ruan Ji and Ji Kang were arguably closer to earlier Confucian thought from Confucius to Mencius with its focus on inculcating the moral independence to "stand alone and pursue one's way in solitude" (*The Book of Rites* 禮記, quoted in Roetz 2016, pp. 308–9), and thus naturally found the pragmatic Confucianism of their time distasteful.

While these debates focused primarily on the social consequences of Dark Learning, and notably lack anything comparable to the controversies over miracles or personal/impersonal spirituality in Emerson's day, they arguably share points of similarity in the disagreement with the more optimistic view of human nature found in Emerson and Dark Learning, as well as an insistence that philosophies and values must be centered on human society itself, with any attempt to seek standards in nature or an "impersonal spirituality" such as *dao* being regarded as inherently suspicious.

6. Conclusions

Introducing his study of Chinese environmental history, Mark Elvin once pondered the question of commensurability between radically separate cultural traditions, wondering, "how far are we justified in seeing the medieval Chinese passion for mountains and the early modern European passion as sufficiently comparable to justify more than casual comparison?" (Elvin 2004, p. xxii). While a detailed comparison of these two cultural phenomena lies well beyond the scope of this paper, the significant similarities between the attitudes toward solitude in nature found in Emerson and Wei-Jin Dark Learning certainly suggest that such a comparison would be justified. These similarities include the debates and dilemmas over the relation between reclusion, self-cultivation and social re-

sponsibility, the way in which solitude in nature was elevated to a metaphysical plane, and the individualist ethic of authenticity that accompanied these, belying Charles Taylor's assumption that "The ethic of authenticity is something relatively new and peculiar to modern culture" (Taylor 1991, p. 25). While the two are not without their important differences, especially the role of the sage in Dark Learning, their common concern with what solitude in the wilderness of nature can offer human life is clear, and can be summed up in Emerson's statement that "Society is good when it does not violate me, but best when it is likest to solitude" (Emerson 1950, p. 90).

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A Biocultural Dialogue between Thoreau and Taoist Thought: Rethinking Environmental Ethics, Nature, Spirituality and Place

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Abstract: A fundamental question of the 21st century centers around the role and place of humans in their environment. Given the great acceleration of consumptive practices engaged in the 20th century, humans stand on the brink of a 6th extinction event. In order to determine our place and role in our global environment, we need to reflect on where we are and what the future will be—we need to focus on the habits of our "co-inhabitation" of the planet. Given the positive and negative impacts of international and global activities, intercultural dialogues are necessary for the care of the ecology of the planet, and one of the most prescient dialogues is between Eastern and Western world views. While much comparative research has been conducted regarding the connection between American Transcendentalism and Chinese ancient philosophy, relatively little philosophical work has been conducted to demonstrate the connectivity between Henry David Thoreau and Taoism. Yet there are, in fact, profound similarities between the American naturalist and Chinese philosophy, in particular Taoism. This paper aimed to discover and manifest the connection and similarities between the philosophy of Thoreau and the ancient worldview of Taoism. Through this comparative study and intercultural dialogue, we seek to trace historical precedents and intercultural dialogue between American Transcendentalism and ancient Chinese philosophy in order to explore the groundwork for a new vision of environmental awareness in order to promote a better future with a community of co-inhabitants and emphasis on the well-being of all.

Keywords: Thoreau; Taoism; nature; co-inhabitants; ethical practice

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1. Introduction

"The World is Burning" appears to be the common mantra of today's environmental activists, and there is some merit to the claim. With a projected degree differential of 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2050 (Masson-Delmotte et al. 2018), increases in extreme drought conditions (Naumann et al. 2018), and rapidly rising levels of urbanization and resource shortages coupled with globalization that promotes monocultures in timber and farming and cultural homogenization, it appears that the world in which we live has become, both literally and figuratively, a consolidated mass that requires only a match to spark the tinder for global catastrophe. According to Crutzen and Stoermer (2000), that match has been struck and we humans are the source of the conflagration. They contend that we have reached an epochal change and, in geological timescales, we have arrived at the Anthropocene era of the Quaternary period. This is to say that humans have the ability, means, and conceptual disposition to significantly alter the planet's climate and ecological conditions. While an unofficial designation in geological time scales, current indicators suggest that we are irrevocably transforming our planet in unprecedented ways, and not for the better. Extractive processes, population density, resource allocation and transportation, ecological degradation due to armed conflict, oceanic and atmospheric pollution, and petroleum dependency all provide evidence for this claim.

Perhaps, however, the claims of Crutzen and Stoermer are too modest; in more extreme terms, Justin McBrien (2016) claims that we are not merely in an Anthropocene era, but, instead, we find ourselves in the midst of an era more properly called the Necrocene. In this more hyperbolic language, we are not merely significantly changing our planet through anthropogenic activities, rather, we are actively engaged in behavior that causes extinction events. According to McBrien, the global-capitalist culture and its habits of personal acquisition at the expense of others are creating the conditions for a 6th extinction event. According to Ceballos et al. (2017), current projections have global extinction of species populations at nearly 30% with a global estimate of extinction rates at 100–1000 times greater than in previous natural history. Echoing Crutzen and Stoermer, McBrien concludes that our current historical epoch is not merely global climate change, but a change that is fundamentally aligned with eradication, extinction, and death.

This Necrocene era, while dramatic, is not without precedent. Nearly three decades earlier E.O. Wilson (1988), marks two conceptual orientations that presage the scientific, economic, and political landscape today. Into the 1990s, authors like Bruno Latour (2004) were continuing this line of inquiry, demarcating the difference between two fundamental human conceptual schemata—biophilia and necrophilia. The former designates a "life loving" orientation and creates conceptual dispositions that celebrate living organisms and ecological complexity. The latter, the "death loving" attitude, necrophilia, retains a selfish disposition that creates the conditions for destruction and extinction. To compound and highlight these ominous sentiments Soga and Gaston (2016) document that the abovementioned extinction events are furthered by an extinction of experience as well. Not only are humans changing and destroying global systems, but we have internalized this necrophilic tendency and we have begun to lose the ability to experience a biophilic orientation. This is to say that changing attitudes towards nature have begun to remove the desire and ability to experience and enjoy nature. From scientific evidence to economic practices to the conceptual attitudes underlying our behaviors, the world does indeed seem to be burning, and burning due to anthropic causes—global climate change indeed!

The above-cited facts and conceptual schemata suggest that in order to recover the ability to appreciate nature, we need to re-orient our conceptual apparatus and change our "conceptual lenses". This is to say we need to alter the way we think and our practices concerning ourselves and the world around us. In other words, we need a biocultural ethic (Rozzi 2012) that can ameliorate, both doxastically and in praxis, and respond to the current trends of anthropogenic climate change. One such philosophical position, nascent in its formation, exists through intercollegiate and international collaboration between universities in the United States and Chile, through the Sub-Antarctic Biocultural Conservation Program (Rozzi 2013). This transdisciplinary program is a collaboration between biological sciences, philosophy departments, indigenous peoples, artists, ecologists, professors, students, and even school children. Through combined efforts, practitioners seek to create transformative experiences by means of which people can re-connect, re-appreciate, and re-consider human-nature interactions in the effort to conserve nature, culture, and biological diversity. Such a program re-envisions both how and why we should practice conservation through the use of multi-scalar interactions and conceptual lenses. Inherent in the practices of biocultural ethics and conservation is the observation of our habitats, the co-inhabitants of those occupying habitats, and the habits of the co-inhabitants (Rozzi 2012). These "3-Hs" of biocultural ethics provide the conceptual "change of lens" that may be required to transform our behavior—to pull us back from the abyss of the Necrocene and to prevent the extinction of experience. Such practices of observation, symbolic language usage, and re-conceptualizing the organisms within a habitat are not without precedent, we find several historical examples that presage this now systematized approach, in particular in the wisdom and practices of Henry David Thoreau and Taoist philosophy. This comparative and intercultural study aims to offer some insights into the conceptual, practical, and ethical orientation of humans and nature.

2. Thoreau

An exploration of the historical record and the wisdom of philosophers is always thought-provoking. Frequently, we turn to the historical record to find an illustration of a conceptual way of viewing the human-nature interaction that can provide examples and traction for our endeavor to transform the way we think and act in regard to our planet. Thus, we turn to the historical account of Henry David Thoreau to offer insight into ways one can encounter and engage with nature—a way that informs our conceptual lenses.

2.1. Reverence—A Conceptual Habit

During his sojourn at Walden Pond, Thoreau claims to have "returned to nature". He simplifies his life, removes himself from the trappings of society that encouraged a homogenization of experience and reconnects with his beloved woods so that he could learn what nature could teach him. This very idea of immersing oneself in one's habitat to experience, observe, describe, and communicate these experiences is at the core of the proposed re-orientation of our thinking, i.e., a biocultural ethic. Thoreau's experiences, conceptualization, and communication with/about nature provide a highly personalized, descriptive account of a spiritual engagement with nature that conceives nature as more than mere resource.

In his writings, we find Thoreau largely speaking with reverence toward nature. Thoreau writes admiringly of the wilderness of Walden Pond, citing his long "rambles" through the woods, encountering the flora and fauna of his New England habitat. He praises the cycles of nature, engaging with them as a denizen of the forest and documenting how he, in his own turn, responds to the geographical and climatic conditions of his habitat. His praise for nature and the processes of nature remind of us songs of praise and worship that we find among the ancients. Thoreau writes:

> Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me. Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system . . . (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, pp. 87–88)

And he continues to remind us of the hymns of the ancients when he writes:

> Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise . . . I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings. There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, pp. 88–89)

The spiritual renewal and cosmic perspective Thoreau gained from nature is one of the explicitly listed reasons why he went to live in the woods. Thoreau's appreciation and praise of nature arise from his deep connection with the geographical, topological, and biotic elements of his habitat. One might say that Thoreau went to the woods to see the woods for themselves, but, importantly, it was not merely to see, but to be in a community with nature and to celebrate its various forms by communicating hymns of praise to his readers.

2.2. Caution—Concerning Domestic Habits

While Thoreau offers praise to scenes of nature and the wilderness surrounding Walden Pond, there is an ambivalence towards other scenes we might call nature today. Thoreau, while not condemning agricultural practices, is wary of them. By and large, Thoreau regards agriculture as a necessary, and potentially restorative, human practice.

He describes with relish his own agricultural practices i.e., the tending of his beans, and speaks respectfully of the products of his harvest for the sustenance of his livelihood while at Walden. He is more skeptical, however, of larger-scale agriculture and ownership of lands. In Chapter 1, "Economics", Thoreau cautions his readers about ownership of property and inheritance when he describes the conditions of his landed neighbors and their constant struggle to maintain homesteads free of debt. His concern is not so much about the natural processes of agriculture, but, rather, how our possessions often take possession of us, rather than serving to promote our flourishing and spirituality. Thoreau suggests for his neighbors

> the farmers of Concord, who are at least as well off as the other classes, I find that for the most part they have been toiling twenty, thirty, or forty years, that they may become the real owners of their farms, which commonly they have inherited with encumbrances, or else bought with hired money,—and we may regard one third of that toil as the cost of their houses,—but commonly they have not paid for them yet. It is true, the encumbrances sometimes outweigh the value of the farm, so that the farm itself becomes one great encumbrance . . .

and once

> the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him. As I understand it, that was a valid objection urged by Momus against the house which Minerva made, that she "had not made it movable, by which means a bad neighborhood might be avoided;" and it may still be urged, for our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them; and the bad neighborhood to be avoided is our own scurvy selves. (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, p. 33)

Because of the difficulties involved in the ownership, maintenance, and labor of many farming enterprises, Thoreau's praises of nature do not extend to the typical cast of agricultural activities. It is not the practice of agriculture to which Thoreau objects, but, rather, how it is commonly practiced amongst his neighbors—Thoreau himself engages in farming activities of a much more attenuated style (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, p. 196).

While some agricultural activities may be required for our sustenance, Thoreau prefers, rather, a cosmic connection with wilderness—a connection that rejuvenates his spirit while connecting him with the deeper processes, cycles and inhabitants found in natural settings. One can appreciate nature, and tend and nurture it in order to sustain ourselves, but, generally speaking, the current trends of agriculture and husbandry see the flora and fauna of nature through a misguided and mercenary conceptual lens. Even though we need agricultural practices for our maintenance, we need, even more so, a strong connection with the land, plants, and animals, a deep, cosmic respect and celebration/communication for the habits and co-inhabitants involved in our practices.

2.3. Lives of Co-Inhabitants

One striking example of Thoreau's engagement with nature, and the creatively symbolic description he provides, arrives in his description of ants in the chapter entitled "Brute Neighbors". In this passage, Thoreau finds himself at this wood pile witnessing a contest between two ants. Upon further examination, Thoreau notices that it is not a singular "duellum" but an interspecies "bellum" with its concomitant antagonists—red and black ants. Furthering his description Thoreau writes:

> The only battlefield I ever trod while the battle was raging; internecine war; the red republicans on the one hand, and the black imperialists on the other. On every side they were engaged in deadly combat, yet without any noise that I could hear, and human soldiers never fought so resolutely. I watched a couple that were fast locked in each other's embraces, in a little sunny valley amid the chips, now at noonday prepared to fight till the sun went down, or life went out. The smaller red champion had fastened himself like a vice to his adversary's

> front, and through all the tumbling on that field never for an instant ceased to gnaw at one of his feelers near the root, having already caused the other to go by the board; while the stronger black one dashed him from side to side, and, as I saw on looking nearer, had already divested him of several of his members. They fought with more pertinacity than bulldogs. Neither manifested the least disposition to retreat. It was evident that their battle-cry was "Conquer or die". (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, p. 229)

While obviously not the clinical language of science today, Thoreau's description provides details concerning the practices of two ant species engaged in the territorial habits of the combatants—documenting how the two different species attempt to dispatch their opponents, even remarking upon the arrival of a new combatant to the fray, marking its time, and joining in the contest. As important as the empirical documentation of the habits of the ants in this anecdote is, the way Thoreau describes this encounter with nature is the point. Thoreau does not elect to merely describe the means by which the ants engage in their contest, but, importantly, he analogizes the contest to the activities of human behavior. Citing Homer and other Greek forebears, Thoreau represents the activities he witnesses much the same as human combat. These myrmidons, he asserts, are Achilles and Patroclus, Spartan soldiers and even New Englanders, fighting for principles and not merely for simple economic motivation. Thoreau writes "I have no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors, and not to avoid a three-penny tax on their tea; and the results of this battle will be as important and memorable to those whom it concerns as those of the battle of Bunker Hill, at least" (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, p. 230). Through this metaphoric language Thoreau narrows the species gap, understanding that ants dwell in a certain habitat, perform certain habits and that these very habits are akin to the habits of humans. Ants fight for principles, principles the same (or similar) to humans, thus transforming mere objects of empirical observation into organisms much like the observer himself—co-inhabitants with the same (or similar) motivations to engage in a contest. In doing so, Thoreau finds himself a witness on a living battlefield, re-conceptualizes what he is witnessing, and understands that ants and humans are closer than one might initially report.

2.4. Creative Communication

This symbolic/metaphorical language is no accident. The purpose is not merely clever representational accounting. The title of the chapter indicates that ants, and other animals e.g., ducks, geese, milkweed, fox, partridge, otter, etc. are in fact neighbors sharing the same space, the same habitat, engaged in their specialized way of life, but entitled to occupy the habitat along with Thoreau. The kinship Thoreau feels with his neighbors and the consideration he pays to them offers a historical insight, proto-conservation ethics, if you will, that biocultural ethics wishes to encourage.

Within the larger scope of *Walden*, Thoreau is continually documenting habits and habitats e.g., his own in "Economy" and others in "The Ponds", "Visitors" and "Winter Animals". Thoreau anticipates the 3-Hs of biocultural ethics in his summary of the time he spends at Walden Pond. With liberties, one might wish to creatively re-interpret Thoreau's own declaration

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, p. 90)

in a more contemporary way . . .

> I went to the woods to deliberately engage with nature, to reduce homogenizing influences, and to see if I could not learn to live as a co-inhabitant with my fellow inhabitants, and not, when I came to die, to discover that I had overlooked the vast life of which I am a part.

In general, it may be asserted that Thoreau has a deep respect for nature and natural processes. He even makes allowances for agriculture and husbandry, if pursued with the

proper conceptual framework. His connection to nature provides a historical antecedent for the more contemporary re-conceptualization of a biocultural ethic. This is to say, we may take presage from the writings of Thoreau should we want to re-formulate our thinking and re-connect ourselves to nature, wilderness, and human activities. Yet, Thoreau is not the only historical forebear to which such a renewed conceptual framework may refer; from Eastern traditions, we find a different but analogous precedent in Taoist philosophy.

3. Taoism

The connection between humans and nature has been one of the major themes in the history of Chinese thought, especially in Taoist philosophy—specifically, in the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi—in which a deep care for nature and the environment is embedded. This nature-based system of thought has not only remained an influential part of Chinese culture but the continued exploration and contemplation of nature have become a major driving force in the development of Taoist philosophy. The thoughts of Laozi and Zhuangzi in the pre-Qin period have been linked with contemporary environmental issues and gained widespread recognition (Goodman 1980; Callicott 1987). As representatives of the Taoist school, Laozi and Zhuangzi's profound wisdom provides important sources that may enable changes in our conceptual and practical engagement with the world. They may provide alternative ideas for a change of lenses that may help combat the contemporary worldview we find in the Anthropocene/Necrocene era.

Scholars such as David Chai, Roger Ames, Chuang-Ying Cheng, and James Miller have contributed to a body of literature that documents the growing shift toward Eastern thought as an alternative to the predominant Western neoliberalism. For example, David Chai (2016) suggests we consider the Taoist concept of nature and emphasizes how it arises from a non-anthropocentric perspective. Furthermore, he emphasizes the multi-scalar levels of reality found in Taoist thought, primarily as a way to re-conceptualize how we understand nature at varying systems-level analyses. Roger T. Ames (1986) addresses how Taoism offers a perspective to think about the process of world-making and the construction of attendant ethics. James Miller (2017) demonstrates how Taoism's holistic understanding of nature can provide a new definition of flourishing for both the biotic elements and the world itself. The above studies show that the insights of Taoist philosophy into the global environmental crisis have opportunities to transform our way of thinking. This cohort of scholars represents a fraction of the myriad ways that one might re-conceptualize the lenses through which we view and interact with our environments, particularly by re-centering our understanding of the inhabitants, co-inhabitants, and systematics of our habitual engagements.

In addition to those larger-scale Western-Chinese dialogues based on Taoist and environmental perspectives mentioned above, a handful of scholars have been conducting intercultural studies of American transcendental philosophy and Chinese religion(s). For example, in *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott*, Arthur Christy (1960) draws a connection between Thoreau and Hinduism. In the second example, one which has received less treatment in the literature, we find similarities between Thoreau and Chinese Taoism as well. Moreover, the connection between Taoism and the writings of Thoreau are both often considered integral to contemporary environmental thought. In the book, *Fifty Key Thinkers for the Environment* (Palmer and Cooper 2000) both Zhuangzi and Thoreau are considered as the foundational philosophers of environmental thinking.

In Taoism, there is a deep care for nature. The understanding of nature reflects how Chinese culture constructs a relationship between humans and their surroundings. Chinese philosophers constructed systematic thinking that nature is the supreme guide and principle for all things and life on earth. Influenced by Taoism, Chinese culture has formed multidimensional emotions and attitudes towards nature through long-term farming practices, that have gradually evolved into beliefs, ideas, actions, and thinking patterns that are different from Western paradigms. People often superstitiously believe in nature, worship

it, observe it, revere it, respect it, and love it. Fundamentally speaking, the concept of nature and its multidimensional meanings in the Chinese context are based firstly on an ethical orientation; that is, to accept and recognize the right of existence of all things in the world.

3.1. Tao—The Way of Nature

The primary principle of Taoism is Tao. Tao, which literally means "way", is seen as the origin and force of all beings and has very rich connotations in Laozi and Zhuangzi's thoughts. In chapter one of *Tao Te Ching*, it says,

> Tao can be talked about, but not the eternal Tao. Names can be named, but not the eternal nature. As the origin of heaven-and-earth, it is nameless; As "the mother" of all things, it is nameable. (Lao 1961, p. 3)

An incomplete description of Tao is a central theme in Taoist texts, especially in *Tao Te Ching*. The outstanding nature of incompleteness and the recognition of epistemic barriers is critical in the foundation of Taoist philosophy. Since Tao is seen as the ontological origin and foundation of all beings, it also becomes the cosmic force that permeates every natural process and all entities. Tao embraces everything and can be understood as a transcendent force that cannot be described in words. The essence of Tao is "nature", yet "nature" here does not only refer to the natural world in the scientific sense, but also refers to the inner attributes of the universe or the principle of evolution of all things. Everything is in accordance with the principle of the way (Tao), and nothing can escape from the regulations of it. Tao can include all beings, and the way that nature works and functions manifests Tao.

In the Chapter 25 of *Tao Te Ching*, Laozi writes,

> Humans follow the ways of earth. The Earth follows the ways of Heaven, Heaven follows the way of Tao, Tao follows its own way. (Lao 1961, p. 51)

This quote shows the basic structure and relationship of the cosmos—including people, the Earth, Heaven, and the Tao. While people's existence and life on Earth follow the basic ways related to the Earth, it also indicates transitive connectivity to larger scales. Moreover, by being connected to and following the ways of the Earth, it indicates that people should not be separated from the land, but, rather, should consider themselves connected to it and should respond to the circumstances found in the terrestrial sphere, e.g., weather patterns, cycles, growth, and fellow organisms/ecosystems. Here, it is important to notice, Nature does not merely mean the natural world, but, rather, things as they are, or what comes naturally. Nature refers to the essence of everything, and the law that the universe follows. Compared to traditional Western thought, Nature in Taoism has a more profound connotation. Nature encompasses everything in the natural world, but, importantly, it is also the origin and product of the laws of the cosmos; that is, Tao-Nature represents the Chinese cosmology and worldview. In the connection between Earth and Heaven (cosmos), people are linked with the land, the cosmos, and the Tao itself. Tao is the law of creation in the universe, it generates and changes everything. Tao emphasizes the nature of the universe and its operation, which includes the natural world and the human world, and Taoism advocates that human beings should conform to the natural law, respect nature and follow its law.

The Tao itself abounds in the workings of human societies, the land, and the cosmos with its transcendental force. Because Tao presents itself in the being, function, and evolution of all things, human exceptionalism has no place in Taoist philosophy. For the sake of a biophilic future, people must ponder, learn, and practice how to co-exist and co-inhabit with the land, the earth, and the heaven.

3.2. Coexistence and Co-Inhabitation

Taoism values coexistence and upholds that people and all things on earth can live together. Coexistence and co-inhabitation are an integral part of a Taoist vision of ecological civilization. In one sense, biophysical nature is a manifestation of Tao—the natural world

is a product of the dynamics of Tao. In a second sense, Tao is also the dynamics of human relationships. It operates and functions in the existence and practices of humans and it operates and functions in the existence and practices of other-than-human beings. Combining Taoist philosophy with biocultural ethics, we find that Tao can be understood as a profound connection that runs through all things, echoing precisely the links among co-inhabitants, habits, and habitats as a new way of understanding the biological and cultural connectivity between humans, other-than-human organisms and the world writ large.

In the writings of Zhuangzi, we find an even stronger articulation of this idea. Zhuangzi observes that Tao is the harmony and "the unity of heaven and humans", advocating that human beings and all things in nature are equal and interdependent symbioses. In Zhuangzi's writings, we find rich depictions of natural and imaginary scenes encompassing mountains, forests, and birds, as well as fictional and exotic animals. These illustrations are not merely derived from people's simple empirical observations and perceptual experiences, they also convey an intuitive sense of connectivity that many have with nature. As Sylvan and Bennett (1988) suggest, Taoism promotes a general view that "engenders fluid hierarchies without power struggle". In the chapter of *Qi Wu Lun* (《齐物论》), "On Regarding All Things Equal", Zhuangzi claims, "Heaven and Earth share the same life with me, and the myriad things are one with me" (Lynn 2022, p. 37). The message contained in the writings suggests that humans and other-than-human beings in nature are a unity or equal parts of existence. This equity requires humans to have an attitude of co-existing and co-inhabiting with nature rather than dominating all other-than-human beings.

In the same chapter, Zhuangzi expresses, "That is, it takes the 'wild horses', the dust, and the breath that all living creatures have been using for each other to breathe." (Lynn 2022, p. 4). All things in heaven and earth are the result of the operation of the breath of Tao. All the things in the world—whether it be megafauna, microscopic organisms, grains of sand, or the smallest particle—are the result of the power of Tao. This framework transcends anthropocentrism and can build an ethical reflection with an emphasis on the coexistence and co-inhabitation on the earth.

3.3. Wu Wei—Ethical Practice When Engaging with Nature

Since the pre-Qin period, Taoism has developed an ethical practice to direct people to engage with nature. People are asked to engage with nature in a natural way that sometimes requires them to step aside from nature in order to think about nature in a more holistic way. It is noteworthy that the idea of humans as external to nature and separate from its processes does not conflict with the above-mentioned notion of unity, because it is for an epistemological purpose—that by temporarily placing oneself external to nature—one can understand oneself (and other species) as members of a larger unity in nature. The subsequent human products also become part of nature, not separated from it. In short, by placing oneself outside of nature, one can return to it more mindful and engaged. This re-conceptualization can maintain the intrinsic value of nature and conserve biodiversity, as it requires that humans cease to be the center of all values. This moral practice can be found in the principle of *wu wei.*

As Patricia Okker states, someone with this disposition develops "their belief in the practice of wu wei" (Okker 1987). *Wu Wei* (无为), in Chinese, means non-doing or non-action, a key to Taoist philosophy. It is significant for reflecting on human actions and associated consequences. It is a recognition and acknowledgment that human actions are part of nature, and wu wei, not acting, allows people space to comprehend this deep connectivity. In Taoism, there is opposition to human beings' defiance and separation of nature, and it advocates thinking about nature in an inclusive way, with the purpose of maintaining the intrinsic value and diversity of nature.

In Taoist philosophy, one sees that human nature follows its own ways, but that humans often reach an epistemic limitation. In our understanding of nature, one such epistemic constraint is viewing the natural world merely as a resource. *Wu wei* encourages us to step back from acquisitive actions to contemplate the other-than-human co-inhabitants

involved in our acquisitive practices. Consequently, Taoism will endorse that humans cannot always exploit nature because of the insights gained in the practice of non-action. By practicing *wu wei*, we restructure our concepts and practices. By pausing and contemplating the unfolding of Tao in its many forms, of which we are only one aspect, it commands us to be thoughtful about our engagements with the natural world. Throughout human history, there is plenty of evidence that excessive, hasty, and imprudent human behaviors can cause serious consequences with devastating impacts on the planet. This wisdom of non-action, or doing nothing, is not a conceptual game, but an awareness of human self-discipline with an introspective, reflective, and humble attitude toward the coexistence and co-inhabitation with others. This self-discipline requires an active and ethical consideration of all other aspects of nature, from species to habitats, and from places to the land. The idea of *wu wei* or non-action, is necessary for human beings to think about our habitation on the planet and its consequence with a reflection on alternative habits of being.

4. A Dialogue between Thoreau and Taoism

Although Taoism and American Transcendentalism emerged at different historical periods in world history and in different socio-historical contexts, the similarities in the idea of nature, wilderness, and spirituality demonstrate a shared wisdom and value in terms of the relation between human beings and nature. The parallels between Thoreau and Chinese Taoism have been examined by relatively few scholars. According to Chang (1985), the classical Chinese text on Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism were available for the transcendentalists in New England are at that time. As Lewis and Bicknell (2011) states, "The scholarly evidence is well established that the Transcendentalists engagement with Asian belief systems proudly influenced their world." (p. 14). Okker (1987) once described Thoreau as "an American Taoist Sage". Versluis (1993) wrote, "Thoreau's natural contemplation closely parallels the Taoist love for and absorption into nature." (p. 93). Lin Yutang, once writes about a general comparison between Thoreau and Chinese thoughts,

> Thoreau is the most Chinese of all American authors in his entire view of life, and being a Chinese, I feel much akin to him in spirit. I discovered him only a few months ago, and the delight of the discovery is still fresh in my mind. I could translate passages of Thoreau into my own language and pass them off as original writing by a Chinese poet, without raising any suspicion. (Lin 1938, p. 128)

Liu's writing suggests a potentially illuminating dialogue between Thoreau and Chinese Taoism. For instance, in *Zhuangzi*, especially in the "inner chapters" (《内篇》), many exquisite observations describe how people engaging with nature reflects people's embodied experiences with nature, as the author's activities e.g., wandering in the mountains, his observation of birds, butterflies, fish, etc. develop many philosophical meditations. In the writing, many unusual things—for example, "exceptions" of the natural world, e.g., hunchbacks, and the physically and mentally disabled also appear in his thinking. We find similar comparisons, even flights of fancy in Thoreau's writing as well. Thoreau describes his embodied experiences rambling through the woods and the characters he discovers there. In a similar vein to Zhuangzi, Thoreau even describes flights of imagination and the discoveries he finds in the narratives he crafts.

Thoreau and Zhuangzi write in a similar style, using metaphorical language to convey messages of wisdom through stories, fables, and vivid descriptions of nature. For example, in the chapter of *Xiao Yao You* (《逍遥游》), "Spontaneous Free Play", the author uses the metaphors of water and a boat to narrate the relationship between humans and nature. In another example, the author writes:

> if an accumulation of water is not ample enough, it won't have the strength to support a big boat. Upset a cup of water onto a dip in the hall floor, and a mustard seed can serve as a boat on it, but if you place a cup there, it will get stuck, for the water will prove too shallow and the boat too big. (Lynn 2022, pp. 4–5)

These metaphorical expressions figuratively express how the dis/proportional relationship between a thing and its environment can affect the operation of that particular thing. In other words, a thing cannot be separated from its habitat. In another example, Zhuangzi continues:

> So, if the accumulation of wind is not ample enough, it won't have the capacity to support the Peng's great wings. This is why it takes ninety thousand tridents to provide such wind beneath, for only then will nothing block its progress when it strikes at the wind and bears the blue sky on its back. Only then does it take aim at the South. (Lynn 2022, p. 5)

Likewise, just as a Peng (鵬), a giant bird, would need enough aerodynamic power to fly,

> the bird's flying habits cannot be separated from its environment. Metaphorically, humans are like birds and nature is like the wind. Without the carrying capacity of nature, human societies and cultures cannot exist and perform their dynamic processes. Zhuangzi uses these metaphors and analogies to emphasize the deep connectivity between human beings and nature.

Like Zhuangzi, we find creative communicative metaphors in the writings of Thoreau—his description of his neighbors as co-inhabitants with rich lives and narratives of their own reflect how both humans and other-than-humans share in the interdependency of life narratives.

One can also find similarities between the recommendations for an ideal lifestyle in Thoreau and Taoism. They both advocate a simple life and pursue spiritual liberation and spiritual enrichment. Taoists endeavor to return to simplicity, where one should resist the temptation of material things and maintain peace of mind; Thoreau also advocates for simplicity in living with a robust appreciation for our natural settings.

Thoreau truly saw that most people were living a burdensome and miserable life, and the extreme pursuit of material things led to this situation. In order to liberate one's spirit, Thoreau recommends simplicity—economic, habitual, and even intellectual simplicity. For Thoreau, most luxuries and comforts of life are not only unnecessary but also hinder human progress. Once people inherited farms, houses, livestock, and farming equipment, they became slaves to the land. Material life can become a burden and people can become "owned" by their property and the tools of their own tools. In "Life without Principle", Thoreau reflected upon how civilization may compromise human nature.

Both Thoreau and Taoists believed that human beings and nature are in harmony and unity, Thoreau at Walden Pond embodies the practices advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the practice of transcendental reflection and immersion in nature. Thoreau, influenced by Emerson, believed that communication between man and nature would purify man's mind, and his spirit would be tempered and liberated. By co-habitating with others in nature, man can improve himself and achieve an ideal life. In a sense, Thoreau felt Tao in the perception of animals and plants around him. On the origin of all things, Thoreau accepted Emerson's worldview that the ineffable origin of all things is an eternal unity. Thoreau pursued harmony with nature all his life. He regarded nature and God as one and regarded natural phenomena and all things in the universe as representations of the omnipresent and supreme God. In Thoreau's case, nature is the law of the universe, a manifestation of the cosmic source, sometimes referred to as God.

While for Taoists, "Tao" is the source of all things, Taoists find Tao in everything. Nature is actually the embodiment of "Tao", and to respect nature as the embodiment of "Tao" is to respect "Tao". It is supreme, inscrutable, yet omnipresent, and is the fundamental force controlling the development and change of all things in the infinite universe. In Taoism, man pursues a harmonious relationship with nature, which is also his spiritual quest.

However, the differences between values and approaches are also worthy of more discussion and exploration. For example, the understanding and definition of nature in Chinese Taoism and American Transcendentalism are different. For the Chinese, nature

is seen as a principle of cosmology and it is more neutral as a guide for the operation of the universe as well as human life. American Transcendentalists, such as Emerson and Thoreau, romanticize and idealize nature in a way to transform God into nature. For example, Thoreau sees nature as a manifestation of divinity (a considerably more anthropomorphic concept), an expression of God's creative power, and a spiritual guide for human activity. In terms of spirituality, Transcendentalists relate it to the importance of self-cultivation and self-development which often leads to a form of individualism. While, for Taoism, individuals always exist and develop along with other things in the universe, with an emphasis on the equality of all things and the importance of living in harmony with others.

Their understanding of nature and spirituality also shaped their appreciation of farming and wildness differently. For Thoreau, wildness is more valuable and appealing than farming, as the latter is always related to economic and social concerns. While, for Taoists, nature is the embodiment of Tao and it is everywhere in the universe, in both wildness and farming. Farming, as a human activity, also follows the law of nature and Tao. Farming manifests the harmony between nature and human beings, and farming is a lifestyle and cyclical process wherein human beings cultivate a deep connection with nature. And while these subtle differences do exist between Taoism and Transcendentalism, both agree that humans can and should engage with nature, both in the wilderness and (possibly) in agriculture. Both activities (if pursued properly) cultivate personal growth, a restructured conceptual framework, and a cosmic connection to the world around us.

5. Conclusions

The central theme of this paper is to present a re-conceptual orientation coupled with a methodical philosophical approach to transforming the lenses through which people view the world. Within the systematicity of Biocultural Conservation, a biocultural ethic, we find precedent for the need to find alternative conceptual and practical means through which humans can address the enormous power to transform their world. In global terms, the historical record of human activity is not promising. We are in the midst of potentially cataclysmic alterations, primarily due to our conceptualization of nature as a mere resource and not as a meaningful entity for which we must have consideration. These practices have resulted in the state of affairs we find the world in today.

The outcome, we contend, is not inevitable, and there may be solutions to the crises we face. However, it will require a fundamental change in the way we view our environment, the world, ecosystems, and our roles within. We do not, on the other hand, have to start from scratch—there are precedents from which we might draw inspiration. The naturalist philosophy of American transcendental philosophy, particularly that of Henry David Thoreau, provides a good start. From Eastern thought, we find a complementary conceptualization in Taoist philosophy. Both Thoreau and Taoism provide descriptions, exhortations, and imperatives to re-think ourselves not as separate entities from nature, but, rather, as members of a community, with kinship relations—the same ontological origin, similar yet different motivations for behavior, practices, and habits that transcend species boundaries—and it is this newfound sense of connectivity that compels us to re-orient our thinking to begin solving the world's current problems. This idea, that of kinship and connectivity, resonates throughout biocultural conservation; it is the reverberation of transdisciplinary research, drawing from varied and often overlooked sources, that entreats us to work as a community of co-inhabitants for the preservation and well-being of all.

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Article

The Realm of *Tianfang* Advocated by the Daoist Philosophy of Naturalism

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Abstract: More and more people talk about so-called Daoist ecological thought. Actually, Daoism does not have a ready-made ecological thought. However, it indeed can act as a vital theoretical resource for constructing such thought. In this article, I will argue how this is possible, and what realm Daoism can attain in the relation between human and nature. I will mainly employ such methods as original problem research, literature analysis and comparative research in the inquiry. Compared with traditional Western metaphysics, Daoist ontology can provide stronger philosophical support for the value and significance of empirical things. In addition, Dao does not dominate things like a personal god with will, but gives them the chance to grow and develop according to their own nature. Lao-Zhuang called on people to imitate this character of Dao. They believed that the primitive nature itself was worthy of respect, and urged us to set limits for ourselves and never to distort things' natural propensities to suit us. Consequently, natural things are neither overshadowed by a noumenon, nor are they subject to humans' conquering and abuse, so they are capable of flourishing freely. This is precisely the realm of *tianfang* which Daoism seeks.

Keywords: Daoism; *ziran* 自然; *tianfang* 天放; relation between self and others; anthropocentrism; self-restraint; harmony in diversity; liberty; environmental ethics

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1. Introduction

With the intensification of conflict between human and nature in modern society, environmental destruction and ecological crisis have become pressing problems. In order to find wisdom to solve these problems, an increasing number of scholars begin to explore the so-called ecological thought from ancient thoughts such as Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism.

This is an excessive interpretation of ancient thoughts. Take Daoism for instance. As Eric Nelson noticed, "The *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* are not relevant to environmental issues by contributing specific scientific research, political policies, or activist initiatives. It would be anachronistic to have such expectations of ancient texts" (Nelson 2009, p. 294). We know that ecological crisis and environmental destruction are new problems brought about by the rapid development of modern industry. In ancient times, they never became universal problems (no matter whether in the East or in the West), and the Daoist concept of *ziran* 自然 never indicates the natural world, so Daoism does not have a ready-made ecological thought.[1]

However, just as Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 pointed out, although Daoism contained no environmental ideology, their thought of *ziran wuwei* 自然無為 would make Daoism an ally of the contemporary environmental protection movement (Liu 2007, pp. 59–60). Additionally, in my opinion, Daoism can be called a "philosophy of relation" and "philosophy of living space". For example, Laozi kept on urging the monarch to deal with the relation between himself and the public in the manner that Dao treats the myriad things, that is, to set limits for himself so as to grant spacious room for the survival and development of the common people. This is a very valuable and modern thought, which is also suitable

for coping with the relationship between human and nature, and can be an important theoretical resource for us to construct ecological philosophy, ecological ethics and ecological aesthetics.

In this article, I will try to answer: Without a ready-made ecological thought, how can Daoism provide theoretical growing points for today's ecological philosophy? What kind of realm can Daoism attain in the relation between human and nature? By doing this research, we can not only clarify the misunderstanding or over-interpretation of related Daoist thoughts, but also find the real connection between ancient thoughts and contemporary environmental ethics, so that Daoism offers profound enlightenment for today's environmental protection and ecological issues.

2. Analyzing Key Concepts

First of all, it is necessary to analyze the two concepts of *ziran* and *tianfang*. In China, *ziran* was first put forward by Laozi. It was mentioned five times:

> When things are accomplished, the common people say, "It's ourselves who accomplished these things 我自然." (*Laozi*, chp. 17)[2]
>
> Keep orders to a minimum. Always be *ziran*. 希言自然 (*Laozi*, chp. 23)
>
> Dao imitates *ziran* 道法自然. (*Laozi*, chp. 25)
>
> The dignity of Dao and *De* 德 lies in the fact that they never give orders but always keep *ziran* 夫莫之命而常自然. (*Laozi*, chp. 51)
>
> . . . help the myriad things follow their own course and do not dare to interfere with them 以輔萬物之自然而不敢為. (*Laozi*, chp. 64)

As we know, Laozi did not define concepts as clearly as Western philosophers did. Now, people may easily misunderstand *ziran* as the natural world or natural laws. To illustrate, a popular teaching book of Chinese philosophy in Europe and America translated "*xiyan ziran* 希言自然" into "Nature says few words" (Chan 1963, p. 151). In fact, the Daoist concept of *ziran* has nothing to do with the natural world or natural laws. It is a compound word. *Zi* 自 means self; the basic implication of *ziran* is that an individual becomes such and such because of his/her own choices 自己而然, rather than being forced or being bestowed, just as Chapters 17 and 25 show. While in the other three chapters, *ziran* is the fundamental character or behavior style of Dao and the sage, indicating to let others follow their own course 讓他者自己而然. Under this circumstance, *ziran* is almost another way of saying *wuwei*.[3] If we investigate it in terms of self-others relation, then *ziran* refers to A's principle of *wuwei*, and the state of B being free from external interference and able to lead his/her own life.

Actually, as early as 1919, Hu Shi 胡適 pointed out that the two characters 自然 should be separated and interpreted as self-so 自己如此 (Hu [1919] 1926, pp. 56–57). In spite of this, once people see *ziran*, they still instinctively misinterpret it as the natural world. So, in order to make it clearer and less misleading, now we look upon this issue from the negative dimension. The opposite of *ziran* is *taran* 他然, which on the one hand means *shiran* 使然 (the individual is compulsorily molded to be so, since his/her subjectivity is not allowed to take effect), and on the other hand means *tongran* 同然 (as a result of *shiran*, the individual is forced to comply with a given standard, thus his/her personality is strangled). Obviously, emphasizing *ziran* will inevitably oppose repression and highlight individuality. *Ziran* is used to maintain the autonomy and difference of an individual. The core proposition of Daoism, *ziran wuwei*, is exactly to preserve *ziran* through *wuwei*.

Now, let us turn to the concept of *tianfang*. It appears in the chapter "Horses' Hooves" of *Zhuangzi* 莊子· 馬蹄:

> I suppose that those who are really good at managing the world would not do so. People have their constant inborn nature. They weave cloth to get dressed and plow lands to get fed. This is the common nature they share. (The ruler

> treats them) equally without partiality 一而不黨. This is called *tianfang*. (Guo 1961, p. 334)[4]

What does *tianfang* mean? From ancient times to the present, most people have not explained it properly.[5] We can see that before the citation above, the author repeatedly opposed Bole, the potter and the carpenter to discipline others. This was actually laying the groundwork for elaboration of the relationship between the monarch and the common people. Therefore, the logical subject of "treating others equally without partiality" is the monarch (precisely speaking, "those who are really good at managing the world"), rather than the common people; and *tianfang* is his way of governing. Perhaps the interpretation of Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, an outstanding Daoist scholar of Tang Dynasty, was the most reasonable. His general idea was: Dao treats everything equally, because handling things intentionally will destroy their inherent nature, while leaving them alone will make them self-sufficient. This is just *tianfang* (in Guo 1961, p. 335). If we resort to *Laozi*, we can understand it more deeply. Chapter 5 says, "Heaven and earth are not partial. They treat the myriad things as straw dogs. The sage should be impartial. He should treat the common people as straw dogs 天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗；聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗". The sage should imitate the unintentional nature of heaven and earth. It is unnecessary for him to eagerly carry out a policy based on love. All he needs is to reduce intervention and let the common people lead their own lives. Sure enough, they will be self-generated and create a world full of vigor (see S. Wang 2019b). *Zhuangzi* also says, "Allow things to take their own course and admit no selfish consideration, then the world will be at peace." ("Conforming Makes an Emperor 應帝王", Guo 1961, p. 294).

Although *tianfang* is mentioned only once, there are some other similar expressions in *Zhuangzi*. For example, "the swamp pheasant walks ten steps for a peck and a hundred steps for a drink, but it does not want to be raised in a cage" ("Essentials for Preserving Life 養生主", Guo 1961, p. 126). The chapter "Ultimate Joy 至樂" advocates "raising birds as birds" (Guo 1961, p. 621), and "Autumn Floods 秋水" rejects "haltering horses' heads and piercing oxen's noses 落馬首，穿牛鼻" (Guo 1961, p. 590), etc. All of these are expecting the realm of *tianfang*.

Another good case in point is Bao Jingyan 鮑敬言, a thinker of the Jin Dynasty who was fond of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. He also mentioned *tianfang*. His thoughts are preserved in the chapter "Refuting Bao" of *Baopuzi* 抱樸子· 詰鮑:

> All living things like to keep their own nature. So being cut up is not what cassia trees and lacquer trees wish; being deplumed or torn are not what pheasants and kingfishers want; being tightened the reins or bridled with snaffles are not out of horses' inborn nature; bearing load is not what oxen are willing to do . . . People always cut roots of live plants to decorate useless things, and catch birds as their plaything. They pierce originally intact noses and fetter feet in the state of *tianfang.* All these actions are presumably not in accordance with the intent of all things coexisting. (Yang 1997, p. 494)

Here, *tianfang* acts as an adjective, indicating a state of being free and released. In summary, *tianfang* can be comprehended in two highly related aspects: as a way of governing, it means that the monarch must not interfere with the common people (whether viciously or well-intentionedly) but let them follow their own course; as the consequent living state, it means that the common people are free from external constraint and enslavement, thus feel emancipated and at ease (many stories about plants and beasts in Daoist literature allude to the human world). If we cope with self-others relation like this, we may attain a realm in which all kinds of species coexist and each grows according to its own inborn nature, a pattern of existence in which individuals are free while the whole group is very harmonious.

3. The Pattern of Relationship between Dao and the Myriad Things

In the process of discussion, I will make a brief comparison between Chinese and Western metaphysics from the perspective of comparative philosophy. I would like to make two main points.

3.1. No Difference of Being Real or Illusory

In the view of traditional Western metaphysics, there are two worlds of unequal status: the empirical world of phenomena and the ontological world of essence (such as Plato's *εἶδος*, Christian God, Hegel's *Idee*, etc.). The essential world is real but not present, while the phenomenal world is present but not real. The essential world dominates the phenomenal world. Compared with the essential world, the phenomenal world has very little significance. It is only a shadow of the essential world. This idealism, which lasted for more than 2000 years in the West from Plato to Hegel, swallowed up concrete things with abstract ideas. This was dismissed by Nietzsche as an otherworldly way of thinking. Additionally, after the 20th century, it is repeatedly criticized by modern Western philosophy.[6]

Zhang Dainian 張岱年 pointed out that one of the major characteristics of Chinese ontology was that "it does not regard the noumenon as the sole reality, and does not use being real or illusory to explain the difference between the noumenon and things" (Zhang 1982, p. 16). Daoism also explores the *arche* of the universe, just as the philosophy of nature in ancient Greece did. However, compared with traditional Western metaphysics, Daoist ontology does not distinguish between reality and illusion. Daoism believes that Dao gives birth to all things, but all things are not therefore the shadow or dependency of Dao. Dao itself never has the intention to overshadow all things with its light. Laozi said in an anthropomorphic way that glaring light would burn everything, so Dao "softens its light 和其光" (*Laozi*, chp. 4) in order to become "lightful but not dazzling 光而不耀" (*Laozi*, chp. 58), just as the winter sun only brings warmth and comfort but does no harm. These features of Daoist ontology enable it to provide stronger philosophical support for the value and significance of empirical things.

3.2. Dao: Not a God-like Creator or Designer

Here, we will talk about how to understand the statement that Dao gives birth to everything. Most people's understanding of this has been biased in one way or another. They either emphasize Dao's decisive effect on empirical things (such as Tomohisa Ikeda 池田知久; see Ikeda 2009, pp. 504–7) or insist that empirical things are born and created on their own (such as Guo Xiang 郭象 and Qian Mu 錢穆; see Guo 1961, p. 800; Qian 2002, p. 141).

We can say the above views have gone to two different extremes. Let us look at the end of the chapter "Zeyang 則陽" in *Zhuangzi*. Taigong Diao comments on Ji Zhen's theory of nonaction 莫為 and Jiezi's theory of an existing prime mover 或使, "The view that something intangible created the world is too concrete, while the view that nothing created the world is too vacant . . . Both views reflect a particular dimension of the fact respectively. How can they be qualified to describe Dao?" (Guo 1961, pp. 916–17). This comment shows that neither theory is acceptable. Why? Hu Wenying 胡文英 of the Qing Dynasty had an accurate understanding about this. He explained, "If we definitely say there is a Master, then there is no room for humans to strive, thus the view is too fixed. However, if we say there is no Master at all, then humans can do whatever they want, so the view is too vacant" (Hu 2011, p. 211).

Dao is intangible from the aspect of entity 體, and intangible from the aspect of function 用. That is to say, Dao's dominance over all things is between existing and not existing. On the one hand, Zhuangzi believed that Dao is a creative ultimate Being and all things' "death and life depend on (Dao)" ("Tian Zifang 田子方", Guo 1961, p. 707), so Dao surely dominates all things to some extent. However, on the other hand, Dao breeds things without controlling them; it gives birth to everything naturally and then lets it grow according to its own nature.

Very few scholars can take into account these two dimensions. Nevertheless, Xu Fuguan's 徐復觀 judgment was accurate. He said:

> However, the creation of Dao has been expressed quite clearly in the two books *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, so it is not that things can lead themselves (completely). However, Lao-Zhuang consider that the creation of Dao is not out of will, nor with an intention, but creates things without knowing itself is creating. Hence, Dao creates all things, but since it has no will or purpose, it breeds things without dominating them . . . as if all things were self-created. It is not that Lao-Zhuang seriously believe all things are self-created. (Xu 2005, p. 206)

> Like Laozi, Zhuangzi takes Dao as the ontological Creator. Additionally, the so-called "*ziran*" means: although Dao creates things, it has no will and no purpose. Its function in the process of creation is so intangible that it seems Dao has "done nothing". After things are created, Dao does not interfere with them at all. Therefore, though all things are created by Dao, they are as if they have been created by themselves. (Xu 2005, p. 238)

Mr. Xu believed that Dao gives birth to everything, so everything is not acting on its own. However, since Dao has no will, all things appear to be created by themselves. This view has indeed grasped Lao-Zhuang's true intention. The main reason why Zhuangzi emphasized that everything depended on Dao to some degree and could not master its own life was to break people's persistence in body and thus make them be content with their fate and accept any change. However, generally speaking, Zhuangzi paid more attention to Dao's characteristic of not controlling, lest controlling should make things unable to live freely. It is much better to step back and let all things lead themselves, so that each individual can act as the initiator of his/her own life.[7]

If we contrast Dao with Christian God, we will find an important feature of Dao is that it does not dominate things but lets them lead themselves. To be sure, Dao is the Master (*zhenzai* 真宰) and plays a certain role in shaping all things. However, unlike a personal god with will, it breeds all things without dominating them. One of the great contributions of Daoist cosmology is the elimination of the previously dominant heaven with personality and will. Compared to a personified master with will, Dao has no will and no purpose. It does not create or dominate things as God. In this sense we can say that there exists no Master. "Showing weakness is Dao's way of functioning. 弱者道之用" (*Laozi*, chp. 40) Dao's functioning is so faint that one cannot feel the existence of this external force. According to the logic of Lao-Zhuang's thought, only if a person does not dominate others, is he/she qualified to be the master. This can be called a master who does not master 不宰之宰. What Lao-Zhuang's philosophy requires is just a Dao which breeds all things and lets them lead themselves without dominating or hurting. Sarah Allan realized, "The dao is a life-giving force that generates all the living things, but it does so in the manner in which water gives life, not in the manner of a creator god." (Allan 1997, p. 100).

Dao gives birth to everything; this does not imply that Dao is dominating everything. Dao gives birth to all things but does not occupy them, breeds all things but does not control them. Therefore, it cannot be equated with the Creator in the general sense. Dao is not a God-like creator or designer, nor a powerful determiner. The relationship between Dao and all things is not the tense relationship between the determiner and the determined. On the contrary, Dao leaves a broad free space for all things to exist and develop. The Dao Lao-Zhuang needed is not a thing that determines all things, but a "thing" that helps all things achieve their aims. They believed that all things have their own nature, and only by conforming to things' nature and helping them fulfill themselves, can it be called "Dao". Different from traditional Western metaphysics, the fact that everything is based on Dao does not indicate that the noumenon determines the significance of phenomena, but that the noumenon helps the significance of phenomena to emerge.

3.3. The Theoretical Motive of Lao-Zhuang's Dao Theory

Lao-Zhuang's ultimate aim of discussing the Dao of heaven was to guide the Dao of the human world. They talked about the relationship between Dao and all things in order to deal with various kinds of relationships in the earthly world. These relationships embody in different dimensions, such as the political relation between the monarch and the public, the international relations among different states, the interpersonal relationship between self and others, and the relationship between human and nature. Lao-Zhuang took the relationship between Dao and all things as a model to handle the above-mentioned relations, and used the great exemplar of Dao to correct deviations made by humans, alleviate conflicts in the earthly world, and create a virtuous world for all things to settle down. Daoism is far from being a "religion of hermits". Lao-Zhuang never lacked public concern. In fact, they were striving for living space and eternal peace for everyone (including themselves) in a unique way. The tenet of Daoist thought, *ziran wuwei*, is to urge power holders to exercise self-restraint so that everything can exist and develop in accordance with its inherent nature.

Dao acts not forcibly and keeps in accordance with the *de* 德of things (here *de* means things' inherent nature endowed by Dao)—all things are able to lead themselves. Likewise, if the monarch acts not forcibly and keeps in accordance with the *de* of individuals, then the public will be able to lead themselves. The reason why Daoism dwells on the relation between ontological Dao and empirical things is to urge the monarch to deal with the relation between himself and the public in the manner that Dao treats the myriad things.

Of course, all philosophical ideas have a certain universality. If we reconstruct the relationship between human and nature with this thought, we will attain the realm of *tianfang*, that is, to allow nature to thrive freely without disturbance.

4. Transcending Anthropocentrism under the Guidance of Daoism

To solve ecological problems, people must first transcend anthropocentrism, behind which is the notion of inequality. What is humans' place in the boundless universe? This is also an important question pondered by pre-Qin thinkers. Here, we can make a comparison between Confucianism and Daoism.

4.1. Confucianism: Ranking the Myriad Things in a Hierarchical Sequence

Confucianism extremely highlights the distinction between humans and beasts, and stresses that humans should not reduce themselves to beasts. The Guodian Confucian slips, the silk text "Five Virtues 五行", *Mencius*, *Xunzi* and *the Book of Rites* have a typical discussion on this:

> Heaven gives birth to hundred kinds of things. Among them, humans are the noblest. ("Collected Speeches I 語叢一", Jingmen Municipal Museum 1998, p. 194)

> Confucius saw Rong Qiqi wearing a deer-fur coat, playing a plucked instrument and singing. Confucius asked, "Why are you so happy?" (Rong) replied, "I enjoy many things. Among all things born by heaven, humans are the most honorable. Now that I have been born as a human, this is my first joy . . . " ("Miscellaneous Words" of Garden of Anecdotes 說苑· 雜言, Xiang 1987, p. 428)

> So, humans are products of the virtue of heaven and earth, the intersection of *yin* and *yang* 陰陽, the convergence of ghosts and gods, and the condensation of the elegant *qi* of the five elements 五行之秀氣. ("Liyun" of the Book of Rites 禮記· 禮運, Sun 1989, p. 608)

Confucianism ranks humans, beasts and plants in a descending sequence, believing that humans are the noblest of all because they know to comply with rites and righteousness. Beasts and plants do not know this, so their status is degraded.[8] "Quli Part I" of *the Book of Rites* 禮記· 曲禮上 says, "If a person does not comply with rites, then although he/she can speak, isn't he/she still a beast internally? . . . Hence the sage sets up rites to humanize everyone, so that everyone will obey the rites and know to distinguish himself/herself

from beasts." (Sun 1989, pp. 10–11). To Confucianism, the value of humans lies in the knowledge of rites and righteousness. If someone does not agree with them or abide by them, he/she will degenerate into a beast. Therefore, it is not strange that Mencius stuck to the difference between "barbarians" and Huaxia civilization, looked down upon Xu Xing 許行 as "a southern barbarian with a cuckoo's tongue 南蠻鴃舌之人" (Zhu 1983, pp. 260–61), and criticized Yang Zhu 楊朱 and Mozi 墨子 for reducing themselves to beasts (Zhu 1983, p. 272). Confucianism advocates extending benevolence to beasts, but hindered by the notion of superiority and inferiority, they think that the nonhuman is only the object of giving in charity from above to below. In other words, Confucian school never treats nonhuman beings as independent and equal individuals, so it is impossible for them to break away from anthropocentrism. Their deep-rooted hierarchical notion will intensify the destructive power of human beings.

4.2. Daoism: Stressing the Equality of Human and Nonhuman

Instead, Daoism stresses the similarity and equality of human and nonhuman 非人. It is noteworthy that in Daoism, the concept of *wu* 物 not only refers to things in the general sense, but often refers to humans as well. Laozi's concept of "the myriad things 萬物" certainly includes humans. *Zhuangzi* says, "Whatever has form, image, sound and colour is a thing." ("Understanding Life Fully 達生", Guo 1961, p. 634). In this case, humans are also things. In the chapter "The Human World 人間世", the sacred oak appears in Carpenter Shi's dream and says, "You and I are both things." (Guo 1961, p. 172). Additionally, the chapter "Xu Wugui 徐無鬼" says, "Teacher, you are the most excellent among all things." (Guo 1961, p. 848). The phenomenon of referring to humans with *wu* is very common in Daoist literature, because Daoism believes that humans and things are the same in origin, and humans are just a member of the natural world alongside things. "Nine Perseverance" of *Wenzi* 文子· 九守 says, "I am also a thing in the universe, and things are also things. Now that both human and nonhuman are things, why should we despise each other as 'it' 相物!" (L. Wang 2000, pp. 117–18).

Zhuangzi believed that human beings have nothing special, and it is really unnecessary for us to be complacent just because we are born as humans. "Now if a person, who has happened to take on human form, were to say, 'I'm a human! I'm a human!' the Creator would surely regard him/her as inauspicious." ("The Great Grandmaster 大宗師", Guo 1961, p. 262). Rong Qiqi's joys of being born as human and being born as a man (not a woman), were disdained by Zhuangzi. By comparison, Daoists "do not care whether people call him a horse or a bull 一以己為馬，一以己為牛" ("Conforming Makes an Emperor", ibid, p. 287).

Daoism stresses the limitedness of human and opposes thinking highly of self. Laozi said, "A person who knows himself/herself is wise" (*Laozi*, chp. 33), "To manifest weakness is wise 見小曰明" (*Laozi*, chp. 52). "Knowing oneself" mainly refers to knowing one's own finiteness. Once a person knows his/her finiteness, he/she will be ready to manifest weakness. Here, "*xiao* 小" does not mean small in volume. "見" must not be read as *jian* which means to see, but must be pronounced as "*xian* 現" which means to manifest. The proposition of "見小曰明" is talking about what attitude we should adopt when facing the world, which means lowering ourselves thus keeping away from self-inflation is wise.[9]

The beginning of the chapter "Autumn Floods" reminds us that humans should be aware that "between heaven and earth, humans are but as a small stone or a tiny tree on a huge mountain . . . When we designate the number of things (in existence), we would speak of them as myriads; and humans are only one of them . . . Compared to the myriad things, aren't humans like the tip of horsehair?" (Guo 1961, pp. 563–64). Among all things in the universe, humans are only a member. There's no reason for humans to think they are the center of the universe. Zhuangzi tried to warn humans to step out of themselves and into infinity.[10]

5. The Daoist Art of Self-Control

5.1. The Direct Purpose of Setting Limits for Oneself: To Attain the Realm of wuji or sangwo

Laozi said, "To learn from Dao, we should reduce (ourselves) day by day. By reducing repeatedly, we endeavor to achieve *wuwei* finally." (*Laozi*, chp. 48). This effort unfolds into eliminating knowledge (*wuzhi* 無知), eliminating desires (*wuyu* 無欲), eliminating fame (*wuming* 無名), eliminating self-interest (*wushen* 無身), eliminating the heart-and-mind (*wuxin* 無心), etc.

I have written about *wuyu* and *wushen* before (S. Wang 2019a, 2019c). Here, we will briefly discuss *wuzhi*. It is often labeled as obscurantism or anti-intellectualism. This is a mistake of clinging to the literal meaning. We should dig into the context and further explore what the concepts specifically refer to. In fact, *wuzhi* refers to eliminating only the delusive knowledge, such as knowledge which serves as an accomplice of greed, petty shrewdness, knowledge used for differentiating which may give rise to axiological discrimination, *shengzhi* 聖智which is claimed to be foresight but actually disturbs everything's inborn nature.

The knowledge that Zhuangzi wanted to eliminate is much the same. Take the first kind for instance, the chapter "Gengsang Chu 庚桑楚" claims, "Knowledge is used for plotting. 知者謨也" (Guo 1961, p. 810).[11] Worldly knowledge, which is motivated by desires and in return stimulates desires further, often throws the world into chaos: the subject of knowledge runs wild, and the external world is disturbed. The chapter "Opening Trunks 胠篋" provides the best description:

> The more people know about bows, cross-bows, hand-nets, tailed arrows and like contraptions, the more the birds in the sky will be troubled. The more people know about hooks, baits, various kinds of nets and bamboo traps, the more the fish in the water will be bothered. The more people know about pitfalls, cages and various kinds of nets, the more the animals in the swamps will be disturbed . . . Hence whenever the world falls into great disorder, the fault lies in fondness of knowledge. (Guo 1961, p. 359)

The chapter "Movement of Heaven 天運" also says, "Their knowledge is more fatal than the tail of a scorpion. Down to the smallest beast, not a living thing is allowed to keep its own nature." (Guo 1961, p. 527). It is precisely due to the great destructive power of this knowledge that Zhuangzi claimed to eliminate it or conceal it without using it. The chapter "Mending Nature 繕性" imagines, "Not a single thing is injured, and no living beings die young. Although people have knowledge, they do not use it." (Guo 1961, p. 550).

To sum up, *wuzhi*, *wuyu*, *wuming*, *wushen*, *wuxin* are to eliminate oneself (*wuji* 無己 or *sangwo* 丧我), namely, to weaken self-consciousness and to prevent self-expansion and self-centeredness, so they can be called the art of self-control.

5.2. The Ultimate Purpose of Setting Limits for Oneself: To Grant Others More Living Space

Daoist cultivation of *wuji sangwo* is not only a matter of personal cultivation, but also a matter of positioning oneself properly in a group. Humans are relational beings. Humans are destined to position themselves appropriately in their association with others. Daoism always emphasizes the position of self and the consciousness of people's self-image, because people's self-understanding not only has a profound impact on their own way of living, but also affects the manifestation of others' significance. On the one hand, *wuji* or *sangwo* is trying not to be enslaved by one's own avarice; on the other hand, it is trying to set limits for oneself, so as not to squeeze others. In Zhuangzi's words, it is to "treat others with an open mind 虛而待物" ("The Human World", Guo 1961, p. 147) and rebuild the relationship between self and others with a non-egocentric attitude. Q. Wang (2004) also pointed out that Laozi's principle of *ziran wuwei* was to let others or assist others to lead themselves, so as to endow others with legality philosophically, establish private space for others and demand respect for it.

6. Co-Existence and Co-Prosperity of the Myriad Things

Ecological philosophy not only needs to solve problems of resource utilization and sustainable development, but also needs to break the idea of inequality and the overflow of desires to occupy and control, and admit that all things have the equal right to exist and develop. Only in this way can we thoroughly break away from anthropocentrism, and human and nature can be truly integrated as one. Nature is no longer the object for the human to conquer, while the human no longer plays the role of conqueror.

6.1. The Equality of Things' Different Natures

Confucianism emphasizes the hierarchical relationship among people and between human and nonhuman, which makes us have to wonder whether there is still the possibility of "all things coexisting 萬物並育" and "different ways running parallel 道並行" under this theoretical framework. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, claimed that everything could not be labeled as noble or humble. This person and that person, human and nonhuman, and all kinds of theories are equal. There is no so-called distinction of being upper or lower. Only this kind of mutual recognition and respect among individuals can help to realize the ideal of harmony in diversity 和而不同.

Zhuangzi extremely despised the practice of classifying everything into the noble or the humble, the superior or the inferior. The chapter "Autumn Floods" says:

> From the point of view of Dao, things are neither noble nor humble. From the point of view of things, each regards itself as noble and others as humble. (Guo 1961, p. 584)

> From the standpoint of Dao, what is noble and what is humble? . . . All things being equal, which is short and which is long? (Guo 1961, p. 577)

In the view of Daoism, the distinction between noble and humble, right and wrong, etc. is artificial, and the action of differentiating is problematic. The chapter "Autumn Floods" discusses "being equal (*qi* 齊)" from the standpoint of axiology:

> A ridgepole can be used to knock down a city wall but cannot be employed to block up a hole. This refers to the difference in function. The horses Qiji and Hualiu can run1000 *li* in one day, but when it comes to catching rats, they cannot do better than a leopard cat. This refers to the difference in skill. An owl can catch fleas at night and discern the tip of hair, but if it comes out in the daytime, no matter how wide it opens its eyes, it cannot see a mound. This refers to the difference in nature. (Guo 1961, p. 580)

> Observed in the light of function, if we regard a thing as useful because it has a certain function, then among all things there is nothing that is not useful. If we regard a thing as useless because it does not have a specific function, then among all things there is nothing that is not useless. Once you know that east and west are opposite but mutually indispensable, the division of things' functions will be determined. (Guo 1961, pp. 577–78)

All things in the universe, even the most trivial, also have their special value and significance. Additionally, among them there is no distinction of nobility or inferiority. Like hawthorns, pears, oranges and pomelos, their flavors are different but all are tasty. So why should we praise one and despise the others? "On Viewing Things Equally 齊物論", the most brilliant chapter of *Zhuangzi*, says, "Things all must have reasonable elements; things all must have acceptable elements. There is nothing that is not reasonable, nothing that is not acceptable." (Guo 1961, p. 69).

6.2. No Destroying Things' Inborn Nature by Human Action

Confucianists are keen to transform others. They regard themselves as the personification of virtue and morality, and consider others as objects to be cultivated. They always

want to shape others according to their standard. This will inevitably result in erasing others' uniqueness and the world's diversity by external norms. Driven by this kind of thinking, they will unsurprisingly consider the natural world as an object to be conquered. Xunzi, the third figure of pre-Qin Confucianists, said, "Adoring heaven and worshiping it, is impossible to be better than breeding it as a thing and controlling it. Conforming to heaven and praising it, is impossible to be better than mastering its law and utilizing it." ("On Heaven" of Xunzi 荀子· 天論, X. Wang 1988, p. 317). This thought of controlling the natural world is a logical extension of Confucian cultivating tradition. Xunzi highlighted man's subjectivity and creativity, which is worthy of affirmation. However, we must be alert simultaneously, because excessive expansion of subjectivity will easily degenerate into egocentrism, whose amplified form is arrogant anthropocentrism.

Daoism, however, believes that everything's inborn nature is already precious, so humans should let it lead itself. Similarly, the wild nature is worthy of respect, and must never be subjected to exterior forced changes. The chapter "Horses' Hooves" questions penetratingly, "Is it in the nature of clay and timber that they should fit compass, square, hook and plumb line?" (Guo 1961, p. 330). In addition, this chapter lists sins of the potter, the carpenter, Bole and the sage, for they have committed the crime of violating things' inherent nature 殘樸. The chapter "The Great Grandmaster" even uses horrific words such as branding the face (*qing* 黥) and cutting off the nose (*yi* 劓) to express the injury to life caused by these external regulations.

Daoism definitely puts forward such propositions as "Creatures cannot overcome the Creator 物不勝天" ("The Great Grandmaster", Guo 1961, p. 260) and "Do not destroy things' inborn nature by artificial actions 無以人滅天" ("Autumn Floods", Guo 1961, pp. 590–91). They remind us to face our own finiteness, to set limits on ourselves and not to bend others' nature to meet our needs, for fear that we should unnecessarily break the spontaneous order of the world and artificially make the world more complicated. Daoism believes it is exactly uniqueness that represents the value and significance of individuals, and they intend to maintain such a diverse world. This is best illustrated by the following words:

> Ducks' legs are short, but if we try to lengthen them, it will cause misery. Cranes' legs are long, but if we try to cut off a portion of them, it will produce grief. Hence, what is long by nature needs no cutting short; what is short by nature needs no stretching. ("Webbed Toes 駢拇", Guo 1961, p. 317)

Everything has its own nature. We have no privilege to make them uniform by a criterion imposed from outside, rather, we should let them be uneven. "Viewing things equally (*qiwu* 齊物)" highlights the equality of things' different natures. To put it in another word, it aims to preserve things' morphological diversity by emphasizing their axiological equivalence. In the final analysis, the theory of viewing things equally is pluralism with the purpose of preserving differences.[12] Hu Wenying comprehended properly, "The theory of viewing things equally explains that things must not be made uniform, cannot be made uniform, should not be made uniform, and need not be made uniform." (Hu 2011, p. 17).

Conversely, if we do not conform to things' own nature, then nothing will be intact, and the great harmony of the universe will be destroyed absolutely. Of course, if it is really necessary for an object to be transformed, we should take its inherent nature into account and endeavor to "return to the primitive state after all the carving and chiseling 既雕既琢，復歸於樸" ("A Mountain Tree 山木", Guo 1961, p. 677), that is, to achieve natural effect under the premise of conforming to the intrinsic nature of the object.

Zhuangzi not only opposed vicious domination, but also rejected the imposition of so-called goodness. For example, he explicitly opposed "to 'benefit' the world by one man's decisions and enactments 以一人之斷制利天下" ("Xu Wugui", Guo 1961, p. 861). The chapter "Ultimate Joy" distinguishes two ways of raising birds:

> Once a seabird alighted in the suburbs of Lu state. The feudal king himself offered it wine in the ancestral temple, told his subordinates to perform the music of Nine Shao 九韶 for it to listen to and present it with the top-ranked sacrifice (*tailao* 太牢)

> to feast on. Nevertheless, the bird looked bewildered and sad, refusing to eat a single piece of meat or drink a cup of wine, and in three days it died. This is to raise birds as to raise the king himself 以己養養鳥, not to raise birds as birds 以鳥養養鳥. To raise birds as birds, we should let them roost in deep forests, roam around raised platforms and flat ground, float on rivers and lakes, eat mudfish and minnows . . . (Guo 1961, p. 621)

Raising birds as tending the king appears to be quite good, but it is actually doing evil with good intentions. The crucial reason for this lies in the fact that we use our mind to measure others and do not allow birds to grow in accordance with their own nature.[13] By contrast, the core of raising birds as birds is to give birds a wide range of free space for them to grow and develop according to their own nature. This is exactly *tianfang*, far from interfering with them from our wishful thinking (even kindly). Furthermore, many people precisely use the name of being good for others to forcibly interfere with them.

6.3. The Great Harmony between Human and Nature

Lao-Zhuang's philosophy contains a profound thought of harmony (*he* 和). The handed-down version of *Laozi* says, "Knowing to be harmonious is the way of eternity. Knowing the way of eternity is wise. 知和曰常，知常曰明" (*Laozi*, chp. 55). However, according to the unearthed versions, these two sentences must be rewritten as "To be harmonious is the way of eternity. Knowing to be harmonious is wise 和曰常，知和曰明" (see Jingmen Municipal Museum 1998, p. 113; Lab of Ancient Literature of National Cultural Heritage Administration 1980, p. 4; Institute of Excavated Literature of Peking University 2012, p. 131). Laozi's emphasis on harmony can be seen here. It can be said that Lao-Zhuang's philosophy is focused on the two themes of individual freedom and social harmony.

It should be noted that harmony not only means order, but also logically contains demand for multiplicity. Harmony exists only in diversity. Monism (*tong* 同) has nothing to do with harmony, and cannot bring order either.[14] Harmony is the balance among diverse individuals. Only in this way can we create a colorful and vibrant world. The key reason why harmony is worth pursuing is that it is the best environment in which all things can grow and develop undisturbedly and endlessly.

Zhuangzi said, "The universe and I exist together, and all things and I are integrated into one. 天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一" ("On Viewing Things Equally", Guo 1961, p. 79). He believed that all things in the universe were not created to oppose each other. They could have been peacefully side by side without opposition. Zhuangzi advocated a state of existence without controlling others or being controlled by others. The chapter "A Mountain Tree" says, "Thus to enslave others is weary, while to be enslaved by others is worrying. 故有人者累，見有於人者憂" (Guo 1961, p. 674). Neither enslaving others nor being enslaved can make an individual at ease. Zhuangzi cherished a philosophical pity for people's mutual bondage. In his view, the ideal group–self relationship is that both parties are not tied to desire to manipulate, so that among individuals there exists no controlling or being controlled, enslaving or being enslaved.

> As for the ultimate men, they seek food and pleasures in the universe together. They do not come into conflict of interest, or do mischief or plot against each other . . . ("Gengsang Chu", Guo 1961, p. 789)

> (So the sage) plays together with things and takes pleasure in the fulfillment of others while holding on to being himself. ("Zeyang", Guo 1961, p. 878)

> The sage lives with others but does not hurt them. People who do not hurt others will not be hurt by others. Only people who do no harm can get on well with others. ("Zhi Travels North 知北遊", Guo 1961, p. 765)

Ordinary people consider humans only as things, while Zhuangzi regarded things as humans. He believed that others were our objects to make friends with and to play with, not to be manipulated and used by us. He expected all things to be in their respective place, to

keep their respective nature, and not to invade one another. This further reveals that the freedom (*xiaoyao* 逍遙) he pursued is not only his personal freedom, but also links with the living state of all things, that is, to expect that everyone is free. Like Laozi, Zhuangzi anticipated fulfillment of all things, not just his personal fulfillment. The Daoist School was striving for space of existence for each individual so that they could fully exhibit their respective values of life.

6.4. The Liberty of Aesthetic Objects

Zhuangzi aimed to achieve a world of "million differences 有萬不同". *Tianfang* is a state of great harmony in which all kinds of things coexist and each enjoys his/her own nature. The chapter "Horses' Hooves" imagines a scene of *tianfang* in a virtuous world:

> At that time, there were no paths or tunnels on the hills and no boats or bridges on the waters. All creatures lived in companies, with their settlements next to one another. Birds and beasts multiplied to groups; grass and trees thrived. So beasts might be led about by tying a cord; nestles could be climbed up to and peeped into without disturbing them. In the age of Perfect Virtue 至德之世, humans dwelled together with birds and beasts, and mingled with the myriad things. How could they know the distinctions between "gentleman" and "snob"? (Guo 1961, pp. 334–36)

It is a pity that Zhuangzi's such thought of harmony among all things is misunderstood again and again. For example, a scholar commented as follows, "These pictures are obviously describing primitive people who have not yet broken away from the state of living with animals . . . He (Zhuangzi) wanted humans to preserve only the pure biological nature." (A New Compilation 1988, pp. 154–55). In fact, Zhuangzi was suggesting that "I" open myself up to meet the world and let everything be as it is. "I" and others roam and play together in the universe of great harmony. At this moment, hierarchical boundaries disappear. Person and person, human and nature are integrated as one. They attain authentic coexistence 本真的共在 and accomplish a dance of life together. In the words of Martin Buber, who was deeply influenced by Zhuangzi, the antagonistic structure of "I-it" (*der Ich-Es-Beziehung*) has been transformed into a parallel structure of "I-thou" (*der Ich-Du-Beziehung*) (Buber 1983).

To let things exhibit as they are is an appreciation of individuality and diversity, and recognition of things' equal right to exist. This is a world of great beauty. The realm of *tianfang* is not only an ethical proposition, but also an aesthetic assertion. Hegel said that aesthetic appreciation had a liberating quality. I would like to add that not only aesthetic subjects are liberated, but aesthetic objects should be liberated as well. Take birds for instance again, the tweet of the bird in a cage is a prisoner's song. Birds are not toys of humans. If we really love birds, we should let them take the universe for home and a garden for a cage. Broadly speaking, we should conform to things' own nature and let them get what they want, rather than acting on our desires, even for viewing.

Additionally, quite different from Hegel's core notion "Beauty is the sensuous presentation of *Idee*", Daoism believes that everything is not a vassal of Dao, and its value is inherent and self-sufficient. In this way, everything is no longer the manifestation of something spiritual behind it, but has the chance to perform on the stage directly.

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Notes

1 Likewise, the proposition "Heaven and human are integrated as one 天人合一" has become a very fashionable idiom, but it is almost distorted into a slogan of Greenpeace. In fact, its original meaning is definitely not the harmony between human and nature; rather, it is stressing from the perspective of virtue that humans should conform to heaven, i.e., to imitate the virtue of heaven 法天and match with heaven 配天. If a person's virtue has reached the height of heaven, then we can say he/she and heaven have been integrated as one. In short, we should be aware of the difference between interpreting the original thought 照著講 and extending the thought to other domains 接著講, otherwise we may drift away from the text and fall into boundless association.

2 Except those specially stated, all quotations from *Laozi* in this article are based on Lou (1980).

3 *Wuwei* is often distorted into doing nothing or no action. Actually, it only negates invasive actions or actions which are not in accordance with Dao. Meanwhile, it advocates doing what Dao is doing. Roger T. Ames properly translated it as "noncoercive action that is in accordance with the *de* of things" (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 66).

4 All citations from *Zhuangzi* in this article are based upon Guo (1961).

5 Cui Zhuan's 崔譔 version of *Zhuangzi* mistakes *tianfang* for "*tianmu* 天牧" (in Guo 1961, p. 335). Apparently, this is a clerical error caused by a similar form (放 vs. 牧), and has violated the rhyme reading too (黨 and 放). Some scholars like Wang Shumin 王叔岷, however, read it as "*fangtian* 放天" (S. Wang 1999, p. 335). This was to misunderstand 放 as a borrowed character of 仿, so as to conform to the Daoist thought of learning from heaven.

6 Naturally this kind of discussion from traditional Western metaphysics has its special value, but it is problematic to apply it to distinguish the real and the illusory and pursue the essential world behind the empirical world.

7 Inspired by this, Heidegger put forward "*Sein-lassen*" (see Ye 1995, pp. 140–41).

8 See the silk text "Five Virtues 五行" (Lab of Ancient Literature of National Cultural Heritage Administration 1980, p. 23); "Ruling Institutions" of *Xunzi* 荀子· 王制 (X. Wang 1988, p. 164).

9 People usually misunderstand the proposition of "見小曰明". To illustrate, Wing-Tsit Chan translated it into "Seeing what is small is called enlightenment" (Chan 1963, p. 164), while Philip J. Ivanhoe translated it as "To discern the minute is called 'enlightenment'" (Ivanhoe 2002, p. 184). The main reason for such typical misinterpretations is that they have not realized that here "見" must be pronounced as "*xian* 現". For detailed analysis of the ancient and modern commentaries on this proposition and my own interpretation, see (S. Wang 2015).

10 Under the influence of Zhuangzi, Heidegger also said, "*Innerhalb des Seienden im Ganzen ist kein Rechtsgrund zu finden für die Hervorhebung gerade des Seienden, das man Mensch nennt und zu dem wir selbst zufällig gehören.*" (Heidegger 1953, p. 6).

11 謨 is an interchangeable word of 謀 since they have the same pronunciation.

12 People often think that Zhuangzi insisted all things were identical, or wanted to use external standards to make things uniform. Quite the opposite, Zhuangzi acknowledged the existence of differences and tried to justify them so as to remind us not to distinguish them axiologically.

13 The fable that *Hundun* 渾沌 was chiseled to death at the end of the chapter "Conforming Makes an Emperor" (Guo 1961, p. 309) is also a typical case of doing bad things with a good intention. (see B. Wang 2004, p. 141)

14 Mohist's theory of "advocating sameness 尚同" has more drawbacks. Even Xunzi criticized them "only knowing uniformity, not knowing diversity 有見於齊，無見於畸" ("On Heaven" of *Xunzi* 荀子· 天論, X. Wang 1988, p. 319).

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Article

Nature Prescribes Laws to Humans: The *Ziran* of the Myriad Things in Early Daoism

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Abstract: This essay examines the nature of things in early Daoism via the lens of comparative philosophy. Daoism uses *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity) to express the nature of things. I explore the *ziran* or spontaneity of the myriad things through the analysis of *de* 德, *sheng* 生 (*xing* 性), and freedom (*ziyou* 自由). The sections on *de* 德 and *sheng* 生 reveal that the spontaneity of things is the ultimate reality, which contains the oneness of one and many, essence and appearance, change and changelessness. The section on freedom revolves around two essential questions in metaphysics: What are things? What is the relation between things and humans? Different from the motto of modern metaphysics, "humans prescribes laws to nature", early Daoism believes that human existence belongs to the constant *ziran*. I call this "nature prescribes laws to humans".

Keywords: *ziran* 自然; nature; spontaneity; *de* 德; *sheng* 生; freedom

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1. Introduction

Ever since Nietzsche's and Heidegger's profound critiques of modern metaphysics, the critique of modernity has become a tradition in itself. Heidegger especially focused on the critique of the objectification of nature in modern metaphysics (Heidegger 1977). With the worsening environmental situation, environmental philosophers have also reflected on the problem of anthropocentrism and dualism in Western metaphysics. Ecofeminists have systematically criticized patriarchy's oppression of women and nature and tried to seek new articulations of nature in a refreshed orientation towards women's role. Up until today, it might not be an exaggeration to say that modern dualistic metaphysics has fallen apart within the domain of philosophy. However, dominion over nature is still prevalent in our everyday life. A philosophy grounded in nature is still to be established so that a new way of life can grow out of it.

In the field of Chinese philosophy, as demanded by environmental issues, scholars have become aware of the affinity between Daoism and ecology. *Ziran* (spontaneity) has started to catch philosophers' attention. Chen Guying noticed that Daoism takes *ziran* as human nature (*xing* 性) (Chen 2010); Liu Xiaogan raised the idea of "Humanistic Naturalness". According to Liu, " . . . what *ziran* expresses is an ideal for human survival in and out of groups and the pursuit of that ideal, a way of getting into harmony with nature, of drawing closer to natural order and harmony". (Liu 2008). David Chai envisions a Daoist nature "no longer bound to a singular actuality but one whose presence is felt across an endless range of possibilities as the substantive realization of *Dao*". (Chai 2018). However, how *ziran* designates a different understanding of nature is yet to be asked.

My essay tries to fill this gap by examining the *ziran* of the myriad things in early Daoism. It highlights the spontaneity of the myriad things as the ultimate reality, which contains the oneness of one and many, essence and appearance, change and changelessness. By revealing the *ziran* of things as freedom, it takes efforts to revert the modern metaphysical motto "humans prescribe laws to nature" to a Daoist one "nature prescribes laws to humans", anchoring the human existence on the ground of nature.

What is "the myriad things"? Is it simply the aggregation of things?

There has been no time like ours wherein things are brought to us in such quick and expedient ways. As a contrast to this quickness and expedience, however, clean water, fresh air, rich soil, etc., viz., the fundamental "things" on which the existence of all things depends, are now becoming rarer and rarer. The uniformity of industrial production has caused the disappearance of diversity from our world. Under humans' insatiable desire for things, the ceaselessly generative realm of the myriad things has receded.[1]

But are things not always already presented to us under the insatiable desire for them in our capitalist consumeristic time? Our world is filled with all sorts of products; meanwhile, the realm of the myriad things has left us. Here, it seems appropriate for us to make the common-sense distinction between natural things and man-made products. Obviously, natural things are becoming rarer and rarer in our daily life, while man-made products are occupying the world. But what does this distinction mean? What attitude towards things is hidden in it? What if precisely it is in this ancient and convenient distinction that the destining of the departing of the myriad things has been fermented? The distinction then will not be able to reveal but will rather conceal deeper problems. For now, I do not make this distinction. What needs to be asked is the following: Where did we lose the meaning of things? How can it be presenced to us?

As a matter of fact, we are always dealing with things. In our time dominated by capitalist means of consumption, however, the association between things and humans is flattened: things are only processed, managed, and consumed as goods. This is so with the things in regard to our clothing, eating, living, and transportation; it is also true with the "nature" that is under protection. A whole industry has been built up around humans' recreation in "nature". The spectacles in nature have become goods to be consumed.

Let us take a look at a common scene in our daily life: I go to the supermarket to buy apples. These apples come far away from New Zealand. From the plantation to the transportation to the supermarket, the processing of these apples is controlled by capitalist industry through modern science and technology. The pesticides and fertilizers used in the growth of the apple trees and the chemicals needed in their storage are all carefully calculated by scientists in the labs and controlled by the industrial chain. Here, the industrial chain is not only an economic form; rather, it delineates the existence of the modern man on the different levels of ontology, existence, and politics. Both space and time are overcome here. New Zealand's autumn is packaged and frozen in a supermarket, presented to me as a commodity; while I, as a consumer, live in spring in another corner of the world.

Apples in this picture are not even related to apple trees. What apple trees look like, when they bloom; how their flowers and leaves are; and the earth, day and night, and wind and rain that are condensed in the growth of the trees are all concealed. Apples are therefore deprived of any identity related to their life (the growth of the apple tree), existing only as an object to be consumed. Meanwhile, although science and technology have become *the* belief of our time, humans' "knowing" is becoming poorer and poorer. Knowing is taken away from the lifeworld and reduced to scientific knowledge, which is again transferred into the hands of some small groups of experts and becomes a means to control things for the purpose of making profits. It is noteworthy that a double alienation and exploitation towards both things and humans happens simultaneously in this picture. For this reason, different from a prevalent narrative of "humans master nature", I maintain that the modern myth of master/slave between humans and nature has been an illusory political, economic, and philosophical construct from the beginning. The process of domination over nature is at the same time the one of humans' self-alienation. So what does this "same process" mean? What relation between things and humans is revealed to us here?

Modern attitudes towards things have their historical roots. Many Western metaphysics[2] seek the nature or essence of things in a changeless oneness. Therefore, the nature of things is severed out of things, whether put in a separate realm of *eidos* or insinuated in the changing properties of things as ὑποκείμενον (*hypokeimenon*), i.e., something that

underlies. The nature of things thus presented can only be grasped by human reason or λόγος, whose function is viewed as the unification of the sporadic changing appearances of things. (λέγω, the verbal form of λόγος, has the meaning of "gathering", from which developed the meaning of "unify".) Things and nature in this view are de-natured to the extent that they are merely appearances whose truth is controlled and to be unconcealed by human knowledge. As is shown by the Greek word for "truth", ἀλήθεια originally means "unconcealment", famously elaborated by Heidegger. In modern metaphysics, things are understood as objects that "object" to and resist man. And, for this reason, they need to be subjected to man the subject. Things or nature have no independent existence apart from human subjectivity.

Things and nature in this picture are postulated as the other of the human self, which is identified through reason. Such is the simultaneous postulation of the rational self and nature in Western metaphysics. However, the nature of things cannot be grasped by the objectification of them, which is nothing but an illusory ongoing self-construction and self-affirmation of the human ego. It alienates at once both the nature of things and that of humans. At the end of the day, we have to ask, even if we could spread the last particle of a flower in front of us, can the nature or meaning of the flower then be revealed to us? Precisely in the self-construction of the anthropocentric ego that seeks to conquer and master, the nature of things is lost and goes into hiding.

The changeless oneness thus grasped is, in the end, an anthropocentric self-construction that aims to control, channel, and manipulate things that are ultimately in ceaseless generativity. It scrapes a thin layer on the surface of the spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) of things and uses it to set up walls against it. (Notice that *eidos* originally means "form" and "appearance.") Our scientific knowledge, insofar as it aims to dominate things, does not go further than this. Thereby we have built our own underground prison, in the omnipresent spontaneity of things, so that we can seek safety and freedom, which is achieved by entrenching walls against things. Meanwhile, we are not completely ignorant of our belonging to things; it is still dimly felt in our fragmented scientific and technological being. Thereby we are left in fear, waiting for the unpredictable punishments of gods, like Prometheus.

The nature of things is expressed through *ziran* 自然 (self-soing, self-going, nature, natural, spontaneity, etc.) in Daoist philosophy. The *ziran* of things is the ultimate reality (*zhenshi* 真實) of the world. "The ultimate reality" here should not be misunderstood as implying something underlying the appearance; rather, it refers to the immediately experienced yet most commonly unrecognized. What is called "the ultimate reality" here is used to express the Chinese word *zhenshi* 真實, literally meaning "true and concrete". *Shi* 實originally means "to fill", and "concrete". In the fundamental Daoist text *Daodejing* (DDJ), for example, Laozi states that one should "dwell in concreteness not gloriousness."[3] The *shi* or concreteness here refers to *dao* and *de*. Also, chapter 16 states:

Empty (*xu* 虛) oneself so as to achieve constancy (*heng* 恒)	致虛恒也
Preserve the emptiness (*chong* 沖) so as to bring out concreteness	守沖篤也
In the process of all things emerging together	萬物旁作
I thereby observe (*guan* 觀) their reversion (*fu* 復)	吾以觀其復也
Things proliferate	夫物芸芸
And each again returns to its root	各復歸於其根
This is called tranquility	曰靜
As for tranquility, this is called returning to the destining	靜是謂復命
Returning to the destining is called the common	復命, 常也
Knowing the common is called illumination (*ming* 明)	知常, 明也
While not knowing the common leads to recklessness	不知常, 妄[4]

The *du* 篤 here means *shi* 實, or concreteness.[5] *Chong* 沖 and *xu* 虛 echo each other (both meaning "emptiness"[6]), and *heng* 恒 ("constancy") and *du* 篤 ("concreteness") elaborate each other. This is to say the constant true concreteness (*zhenshi* 真實) exposes itself in emptiness, i.e., *chong* and *xu*. It is only in emptiness that truth and reality are called forth

and preserved. That which is true and real (or *zhenshi* 真實) is therefore not an abstract idea, but the concreteness that is to be experienced in our life through the practice of emptying. Thereon one can observe that things proliferate and each returns to their root, going back to tranquility. Such is the spontaneity (ziran) of things, the way ultimate reality is. *Zhen* 真 is, as Zhuangzi says, "returning to being true".[7] Like the character *shi* 實, it also refers to the ultimate reality.

The *ziran* of the myriad things is the ultimate reality. It is therefore the happening of *dao*. The spontaneity of things is the expression of *dao*, and *dao* is the expression of the spontaneity of things. There is no otherworldly realm or substance called dao that is independent of the spontaneity of things. This is against the understanding that separates *dao* and things as two different pieces. Though this is not in any sense the dissolution of the root-source meaning of *dao*. Rather, this worry itself shows the understanding of *dao* as some "thing" that is sought outside of the spontaneity of things, whereby precisely the root-source meaning of *dao* is lost. Spontaneity of things as the ultimate reality illuminates the root-source meaning of *dao*. That dao is the root-source means dao dwells in the spontaneity of the myriad things. Only at the root-source is the reality of the spontaneity of all unconcealed to humans.

"The ultimate reality" is similar to the Buddhist idea "suchness" (*zhenru* 真如, *rushi* 如是) or "the ultimate true form" (*jiujingshixiang* 究竟實相). It is, of course, different from the substantial "reality" in some forms of Western metaphysics, although it does not exclude this understanding of reality. Ultimately, the different views of reality understood from either substantiality or process are only distinct manifestations of ziran.

For the translation of ziran in terms of things I will use "spontaneity", which expresses the oneness of one and many, essence and appearance, change and changelessness. In what follows, I will elaborate the meaning of spontaneity in terms of creativity (*de* 德), *sheng* 生, and freedom. Spontaneity as the ultimate reality is against the metaphysics that entitles truth only to human beings who are thought of as being exclusively equipped with logos amongst all beings. That spontaneity is the ultimate reality is to say humans belong to truth, i.e., the *ziran* of the myriad things. In the ultimate reality as spontaneity human existence unfolds. I refer to humans' belonging to nature in the ultimate sense as "*ziran* prescribes laws to humans". What is called "laws" here is understood from the Chinese character *fa* 法, designating that which is constant. That *ziran* prescribes laws to humans is to say the existence of humans belongs to the constant nature.

2. Spontaneity as Creativity (*de* 德)

De 德 in oracle bone script is written as  . With the eye on the left and the way on the right, the character symbolizes an eye focusing on the way. This is interestingly similar to the *dao* character in the bronze script,  , symbolizing walking on the way. Before Laozi, *de* in the Zhou Dynasty was mainly used to refer to the morality of humans, especially the rulers, which is a meaning that had been inherited by many schools of Chinese philosophy afterward. This is why it is usually translated as "virtue." *De* in the DDJ, however, has its target. Laozi takes aim at the ideology of *yidepeitian* 以德配天 (lit., "partaking in heaven with virtue") in the Zhou Dynasty, that is, the notion that heaven bestows power to those who are virtuous. As a historical matter of fact, this ideology was used to justify and strengthen the rule of the Zhou Dynasty. With a new interpretation of *de*, Laozi liberates this term from its traditional connotations as a political and moral human property and releases it to *dao* and the myriad things.

In my view, Laozi hereby raises a Zen question: What is the original face of *de*? The *de* as such is not a tool to serve the purpose of maintaining hierarchies but intends to return spontaneity (*ziran*) to the myriad things and humans. On the one hand, it is closely associated with *dao*; on the other, it is an expression of the nature of things (the nature of humans included). Therefore, *de* in the DDJ pervades the different layers of *dao*, things and humans. In fact, Laozi makes the de of things, i.e., the spontaneity or *ziran* of things, set the

foundation for the *de* of humans. The *de* of humans follows the spontaneity of the myriad things. Obviously, the *de* of humans thus understood, which gains its meaning through *ziran*, is very different from the interpretation as "virtue" or "morality" by other schools. This historical background also lets another important meaning of *ziran*, that is, freedom, be revealed to us.

Because of these characteristics of de in the DDJ, when it does not specially refer to the de of humans, I use Whitehead's term and translate it as "creativity." The *Xici* commentary has, "The daily renovation is called the abundant *de* 德 (creativity); the ceaseless generativity is called *yi* 易 (change)." (Li 1994, p. 561)[8] And also, "the great *de* of heaven and earth is called generativity (*sheng*)." (Li 1994, p. 619)[9] *De* is ceaseless creativity. "Creativity" is used here to show that it covers death and life, i.e., what is called by Zhuangzi "waxing and waning, withering and decay" (*yingxushuaisha* 盈虛衰殺). It designates the spontaneity (*ziran*) of *dao* and things.

Next, I will elaborate the meaning of de through the reading of chapter 51 in the DDJ. Chapter 51 has:

Dao gives life	道生之
De nurtures	德畜之
Events shape	物形之
And circumstances consummate	而器[10] 成之
Therefore all things revere *dao* and honor *de*	是以萬物尊道而貴德
As for the reverence directed at *dao*	道之尊也
And the honor directed at *de*	德之貴也
It is out of the constant self-soing (heng ziran)	夫莫之爵而恒自然
Without anyone having ennobled them	
Dao gives them life and nurtures them	道生之畜之
Rears and develops them	長之遂之
It brings them to fruition and maturation	亭之毒之
Nourishes and extinguishes them	養之覆之
Dao gives them life	生而弗有也
Yet, does not manage them	
It assists them	為而弗恃也
Yet, makes no claim upon them	
It rears them	長而弗宰
Yet, does not dominate them	
This is called the dark *de*[11]	是謂玄德

In this chapter, *dao*, *de*, things, *heng* 恒 (constant), and *ziran* all appear together. Contrary to a common understanding, I do not think it is the case that the "*dao* gives life" comes prior to the "*de* nurtures", which again is subsequently followed by the growth, nourishing and extinguishment of things, no matter how we understand this "priority", whether it is cosmological, logical, or existential in terms of humans' experience in practice. The "*dao* gives life" is at once " *de* nurtures", which is constancy or *heng*, spontaneity or *ziran*, and which is the growth, nourishing, and extinguishment of things.

The meaning of *de* in this chapter is elaborated from the perspectives of both giving and receiving. From the perspective of giving, *dao* gives life to all and nourishes all, and this is the *de* or creativity of *dao*; from the perspective of receiving, things receive *dao* so that they can have life and grow (*sheng* 生). Such is the *de* or creativity of things, viz., the spontaneity of things, or their growth, nourishing, and extinguishment. *De* 德 and *de* 得are homophonic. *De* 得 means receiving and gaining, which implicates and elaborates the meaning of *de* 德. These two perspectives are mingled into one, the "*dao* gives life" is the spontaneity of the myriad things, and this is the dark *de* (*xuande* 玄德). That which is called the "dark creativity" is spontaneity itself, the illumination of the myriad things by the creativity of the darkness (referring to *dao*, the Way).

Creativity is the Way making its ways. *De* is an expression of *dao*, and *dao* is an expression of *de*. *Dao* and *de* disclose each other. There is no priority or posterity between them. People who seek priority and posterity amongst *dao*, *de*, and things often grasp de, explicitly or implicitly, as particularity and *dao* as universality, while de is further taken as a property of things. This view is quite prevalent among academics. For example, Zhang Dainian, in his *An Outline of Chinese Philosophy*, claims, "*De* is what a thing gains from *dao*. *De* is particularity and *dao* is totality." (Zhang 2006, p. 44) Zhang interprets de as the particularity that partakes in the universal *dao*; he then seeks the universality of *dao* in the totality of things. Xu Fuguan says, "What Zhuangzi calls *de* is the *dao* that is internalized in things" (Xu 1969, p. 225), as if *dao* can be external to things. In accordance with the view that *de* is the spontaneity of things, things are the condensation of creativity or *de*. So it is not the case, as a common opinion holds, that things have de, whereby de is taken as a property of things as substance. Such a view is a misreading of *dao*, *de*, and things altogether. Under this expedient distinction of universality/particularity and substance/property, *dao*, *de* and things are all substantialized and therefore reified.

However, *dao* is not an abstract metaphysical principle, and neither can the expedient distinction of universality/particularity capture the relation between *dao* and *de*. Spontaneity as *de* 德 (creativity) and *sheng* 生 (generativity) is not particularity, but the oneness of particularity and universality, one and many. Dao is at once its creativity, that is, the disclosing of *dao*; such is *ziran*, or spontaneity. Particularity and universality belong to each other in spontaneity.[12]

De also implies *shi* 實, i.e., true and concrete. For example, the *deshan* 德善 (literally true goodness) and *dexin* 德信 (true credibility) in chapter 49 indicate this meaning. It is often associated with *heng* 恒 or constancy in the DDJ. *Hengde* 恒德 is a common expression in the DDJ. Chapter 51 is a good example. Heng in the DDJ is used to describe *dao* and *ziran*. Following this, the growth, nourishing, and extinguishment of things are constancy, creativity, *ziran*, or spontaneity. And such is *dao*. Spontaneity as constant creativity is to say, that which is permanent is permanent creativity.

3. Spontaneity as *Sheng* 生

Ziran in Daoism expresses the nature of things (including human nature). What is usually translated as "nature" here is the character *xing* 性. This character, however, is not in the DDJ, nor is it in the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi*. This is because the original form of the character *xing* is *sheng* 生 (life, growth, etc.), which is an important term in both texts. It is only later that the heart radical was added to *sheng* 生 and the *xing* 性character was developed. Take the Zhuangzi as an example. In the inner chapters, the *sheng* character that appears in the nourishment of life (*yangsheng* 養生) in the "Yang Sheng Zhu" ("The Primacy of Nourishing Life"[13]), the "rectification of life" (*zhengsheng* 正生) and "following *ziran* but not adding to life" (*changyinziranerbuyisheng* 常因自然而不益生) in the "De Chong Fu" ("Markers of Full Virtuosity"[14]), etc., can all be seen as *xing* 性. For example, the "following *ziran* but not adding to life" is to say that true nature follows *ziran*. "Da Zong Shi" ("The Great Master") says, "Fish live free at ease in water, and human beings dwell free at ease in dao. Those who live free at ease in the water dart through the ponds, finding their nourishment and support. Those who dwell in *dao* free at ease do not bother to serve any particular goal, thereby allowing the flow of their lives to settle into stability (*shengding* 生定)." (Chen 1983, p. 213)[15] The *sheng* here can also be viewed as *xing*. This passage uses the fish's living in water freely as a metaphor to show the following matter of fact: Non-acting and dwelling in *dao*, humans can achieve tranquility of their nature. The character *xing* 性 only began to appear in the outer and miscellaneous chapters. Both the "Pian Mu" ("Webbed Toes") and the "Da Sheng" ("Fathoming Life") list *sheng*, *xing*, and *de* together. For example, the "Pian Mu" has, "All in the world spring to life (*sheng* 生) spontaneously, not knowing why they are born (*sheng* 生)" (Chen 1983, p. 260).[16] *Sheng* is understood through spontaneity or *ziran*; it also says in this chapter that "harming their life and hurting their nature" (*canshengshangxing* 殘生傷性). The *sheng* and *xing* correspond to

and elaborate each other here. "Da Sheng" says, "Those who open the heavenly benefit life (*desheng* 德生); those who open the human damage life." (Chen 1983, p. 504)[17] The *sheng* or life here can also be understood as xing or nature, put together with de, to show the meaning of *ziran*.

Comparing *sheng* 生 with *xing* 性, a distinctive feature of sheng is that it penetrates *dao* and things at the same time, like many important terms in Daoism (e.g., *dao*, *de* and *ziran*) We can say "*dao* gives life" (*daosheng* 道生), as well as talk about the life of things (*wuzhisheng* 物之生). Take the example of chapter 34. It states, "Freely flows the Great Way. It runs to the left and right. All myriad things depend on it for life . . . "[18] What is translated here as "freely flowing" is the character fan 汎, using the free-flowing water to symbolize the all-pervading characteristic of dao. Ziran is articulated here from the perspectives of *both* dao and things. It is the freely flowing Great Way, as well as the life of the myriad things. The character *xing* 性 (nature), however, loses the significance of sheng that penetrates both *dao* and things and is used specially to refer to things. The nature of things that departs from the dao in language means its understanding of both dao and things has deviated from their original meanings.

In what follows, I will explore the meaning of ziran through the original form of *xing* 性, i.e., *sheng* 生. *Sheng* in the oracle bone script is written as  , with the lower part the earth, and the upper part the grass. The Shuowen Jiezi 說文解字 glosses, "*Sheng* means to proceed. The character symbolizes the grass growing out of the earth." *Sheng* means to arise, to grow, to proceed, to produce, life, etc. Of course, it also has the meaning of "nature" or *xing* 性, though *xing* or what is translated as "nature" here has to be understood from its original meaning of sheng. The *Xici* commentary states, "The daily renovation is called the abundant *de* (creativity); the ceaseless generativity (*shengsheng* 生生) is called *yi* (change)." That which is daily renovating (i.e., the ceaseless generativity or the *shengsheng*) is *ziran*, and this is creativity or *de*, and also *dao*.

The oracle bone script sheng presents the following image to us: A seed buried in the soil perceives the spring, sprouting out of the soil and growing in the sunlight. A broader picture is indicated: When the sun has reached the meridian height, it begins to decline; when the moon has become full, it begins to wane; warmth and coldness push each other; yang deceases and yin increases; "Thunder moves, wind disperses, rain nourishes, sun dries." (Li 1994, p. 693)[19] The spontaneity of the myriad things discloses as such.

Sheng as nature of things means that the true being (that is, becoming) of things is truth (that is, their presencing). Such is *ziran*, and the ultimate reality (*zhenshi* 真實). As such, there is no separation between essence and appearance. In the process of a seed growing into a tree, the growth and death of the seed, the trunk, the branches, and leaves is reality itself. Reality is appearing; what appears is reality. Reality is not, therefore, some changeless substance that underlies changing appearances, as with Aristotle's *hupokemenon*. The ceaselessly generative things are the ultimate reality of *ziran*. Hence, the myriad things show the truth; the truth shows the myriad things.[20] And this is spontaneity. Reality and truth are not any humanistic unifying principle of some unknown lifeless matter. The ceaselessly generative spontaneity as the ultimate reality is all-pervasive, and *ziran* is the oneness of essence and appearance. The high mountains and the flowing water, the drifting clouds and the vast ocean, wind and rain, sun and moon—all things are as they are. Such is the spontaneity as the ultimate reality.

That things are as they are is reality and the nature of things. This understanding of the nature of things is embodied in the essential thoughts of Western metaphysics, such as reality, substance, essence, nature (φύσις, phusis), and so on. These are basically different forms of "being." "Reality", "substance", and "essence" in ancient Greek are all οὐσία, the nominal form of the copula "to be"; τί ἐστι ("what is") is also translated as "essence"; what φύσις articulates is also Being. As Heidegger says, "Phusis is Being itself, by virtue of which beings first become and remain observable." (Heidegger 2000, p. 15) The problem of Plato is that Being is understood only as immutable and atemporal. The fact is, however,

that Being always was, is, and will be, which is to say, Being is becoming. There is no substance or another world called Being besides, or under or above becoming.[21]

The Daoist ziran is similar to the Buddhist idea of suchness, both expressing the truth of all phenomena. Next, I will elucidate its meaning through a Chan Buddhist koan. According to the Compendium of the Five Lamps (*Wudenguiyuan* 五燈會元):

Master Xuansha was addressing his monastics when he heard a swallow singing. He said to the assembly, "This is the profound dharma of real form. It skillfully conveys the essence of the true teaching". He then descended from the teaching seat.[22]

Reality appears in the singing of the swallow right here, at this moment. That is to say, the singing of the swallow appears in reality; it is reality itself. Such is ziran or spontaneity. The sound and color of all beings can only be true and real when seen in spontaneity. *Ziran* or spontaneity is the constantly appearing reality. It is arising emphatically, flowing into ever novel forms.

In the image of sheng as the sprouting seed, some seeds grow into trees, while some become food for other animals, and some become compost for other trees. All of these are the manifestations of spontaneity. In this growth process of the seed, we can distinguish the seed and the tree or seek the identity between them. At the same time, the identities of the sun, wind and rain, and the earth are also condensed in the growth of the tree. The Daoist idea of *hua* 化 (transformation) can help to elaborate this point. The ocean evaporates and clouds are generated; clouds gather and rain falls; the rain again transforms into trees, creeks, and so on; the fruits of the trees and the creeks then transform into the lives of the animals. As such, all is in all, for all is ziran. This is what Buddhism calls "All is one and one is all." The "one" here can refer to particular individuals and also spontaneity as reality itself. In terms of individuals, every individual as a microcosmos contains and reflects the universe as a whole. Moreover, within every individual there are infinite worlds; in terms of spontaneity as reality, everything is spontaneity or *ziran*, and spontaneity is all. All distinctions or identities are the condensation of spontaneity, and also a result of human conceptualization for the convenience of utility.

As a comparison, identity in some Western philosophies such as Plato's is confined to ideas and forms, which seeks essence only through the changeless sameness. Some mainstream modern scientific ideas follow this type of philosophical thinking, for example, the definition of lifeless matter, the search for the smallest particles, for some fixed structures, etc.[23] Nevertheless, with regard to phenomena, there is nothing the "same" between a seed and a tree. Of course, according to Aristotle, if a seed is not influenced by harmful external conditions, it naturally grows into a tree. Though what is equally true is that, if not influenced by any "external" conditions, a seed cannot even begin to grow into a tree. A seed needs to assimilate all differences, i.e., the earth, sun and moon, wind and rain, hot and cold, etc., everything that can be seen or not, for it to grow into a tree. Sameness and difference come out of the interception and shift of human perspectives. What is important here is that we have to understand a matter of fact: It is not that there is any *ziran* sought through changeless substance or nature of things, but no matter how humans seek or delineate, there is nothing that is not *ziran*. No matter whether we understand it or not, there is nothing that is not *ziran*.

That spontaneity is the ultimate reality is to say that that which is constant constantly dwells in ceaseless transformation. That which is in change and impermanence is the appearing of the true and real. That which constantly is is in constant flow; the One can be differentiated. That which is impermanent (*wuchang* 無常) is the non-be-ing (*wu*-ing) of that which permanently is. Because it is in constant transformation, therefore it is constant. And such is spontaneity.

Spontaneity is the oneness of change and changelessness. Change and changelessness mutually postulate each other. Change is always the change of what is the same; changelessness is only possible because of the experience of change. Metaphysics rightly grasps the point here: it is the changeless that changes. As is recounted by Kant, "Only what is permanent is altered; what can be transformed does not itself suffer any alteration . . . "

(CPR, B231; Kant 2007) However, both change and changelessness are the result of human conceptualization. In making change and changelessness mutually belong to each other, spontaneity transcends the perspectives of change and changelessness. From the ancient to now till the infinite future, there is only spontaneity. Ultimately, there is nothing else except for spontaneity. In this sense, substance, property, form and matter, relationality, process, reason, emotion, cause and effect, etc., are all reflections of spontaneity as reality.

4. Spontaneity as Freedom: Nature Prescribes Laws to Humans

In *Tales of Hulan River* Xiao, Hong writes:

> When the flowers bloomed it was as though they were awakening from a slumber. When the birds flew it was as though they were climbing up to the heavens. When the insects chirped it was as though they were talking to each other. All these things were alive. There was no limit to their abilities, and whatever they do, they had the power to do it. They did as they willed in complete freedom.
>
> If the pumpkins felt like climbing up the trellis they did so, and if they felt like climbing up the side of the house they did so. If the cucumber plant wanted to bring forth an abortive flower it did so; if it wanted to bear a cucumber it did so; if it wanted none of these, then not a single cucumber nor a single flower appeared, and no one would question its decision. The cornstalks grew as tall as they wished, and if they felt like reaching up to the heavens, no one would give it a second thought. Butterflies flew wherever they desired; one moment there would be a pair of yellow butterflies flying over the other side of the wall, the next moment a solitary white butterfly flying over from this side of the wall. Whose house had they just left? Whose house were they flying to? Even the sun didn't know the answers to such questions. (Xiao 1988, p. 76)

In my view, what this passage shows to us is not only a literary imagination. It rather vividly articulates the Daoist understanding of the nature of things and freedom in a literary way, that is, *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity, nature) is freedom (*ziyou* 自由). As master Linji Yixuan says, "Lively" ("*huopopodi* 活潑潑地") There is no doubt that this understanding of the nature of things and freedom is different from, or rather, contrary to modern metaphysics, according to which things merely follow the rules of cause and effect, having no freedom to talk about at all. Freedom, for the Enlightenment thinkers, exclusively belongs to human beings. That nature is a machine is a major metaphor of modern metaphysics. This is still a common belief about the nature of things and freedom in our time.

According to Daoist philosophy, however, things are as they are. Such is ziran or spontaneity, reality, and also freedom. Freedom is therefore not the form sealed in some other world that can only be approached through human reason; neither is it an autonomous will of the animal rationale exerted against the necessity of nature, or the free choice of the human customer. It does not primarily concern humans at all. Rather, spontaneity and freedom as the ultimate reality are the condition for any form of human existence. It is not the case, thereupon, that humans possess freedom or master nature. But rather, humans belong to *ziran* (nature, spontaneity) and freedom. For this reason, Laozi says, "The human emulates the earthly; the earthly emulates the heavenly; the heavenly emulates ziran." (DDJ, 25) The spontaneity of *dao* and things is what humans emulate. According to Kant, humans prescribe laws to nature, which is a motto of modern metaphysics. Laozi's claim, therefore, is contrary to this view, which I would like to call here "nature prescribes laws to humans." Right away, we face a Kantian question: how is it possible for nature to prescribe laws to humans?

Let us first take a look at Kant's concepts of nature and freedom. Nature has multiple layers of meanings in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and they serve different purposes. On the first level, the common sense understanding of the modern concept of nature as the external world is actually things in themselves in Kant's philosophy. This is the X that is beyond any human experience and knowledge. It is the noumena, the pure nothingness that is to be negated and shed light on by human reason. On the second level, nature as

mere appearance is a representation of the a priori categories.[24] Causality, for example, is one of them. Kant states, " . . . all objects of an experience possible to us are nothing but appearances; that is, they are mere representations which—in the manner in which they are represented, namely, as extended beings, or series of alterations—have no independent existence outside our thoughts." (CPR, B519.) Nature, insofar as it is experienced, is mere representation and has no independent existence outside of human thoughts. For this reason, Kant claims "Categories are concepts which prescribe laws a priori to appearances, and therefore to nature as the sum total of all appearances." (CPR, B163) Nature is only a sum total of all appearances, to which human reason gives laws. Thirdly, when it comes to freedom, however, even this nature as mere appearance has to be overcome. For Kant, freedom is " . . . independent and free . . . from all natural necessity." (CPR, B569) From the antitheses of nature and freedom develops the division of the distinct realms of noumena and phenomena.

Here, nature is posited as the chain that needs to be broken off for the sake of human freedom. Consequently, freedom is spoken of in different senses. Firstly, human freedom or spontaneity means things in nature are determined as mere representations through the concepts of understanding. This, together with sensitivity, however, is posited as another layer of "nature" that needs to be overcome by the freedom of practical reason. These different layers of meanings of nature and freedom in Kant, as one of the most important founders of modern metaphysics, show that the modern concept of "nature" is a convenient human construct for political, economic, and axiological setups. It is designed to fulfill the role of "the dominated." Nature is set up as that which is to be conquered and mastered by human subjects armed with a dominating intellect. Consequently, the accomplishment of human freedom means the disavowal of nature. Free will means first of all freedom from the causality of nature. But, according to Kant, causality itself is an a priori construct of human understanding, to which the autonomous agent himself has to be subsumed. Insofar as a priori is understood as necessary and objective, freedom is reason overcoming its own necessity and objectivity. If this desperate situation of the self-contradictory reason teaches us anything at all, it at least should shed light on the following matter of fact, that is, that freedom cannot be taken away and eliminated from nature, and, in the end, when understood as a power against nature, whether it can be achieved becomes fundamentally problematic.

This illusory freedom against nature is associated with a certain understanding of the nature of things. With the degradation of things to mere appearances to human understanding, freedom is ascribed exclusively to the animal rationale.

Chinese culture, on the contrary, offers us a different image of the nature of things, and also the relation between things and humans—and accordingly a different understanding of freedom. As I have pointed out, nature prescribes laws to humans in Daoism. We have also raised a Kantian question: How is it possible for nature to prescribe laws to humans?

Things are not merely representations of human understanding in Daoist philosophy. On the contrary, humans belong to things. Next, I will explore Daoist thoughts on things and the relation between things and humans through chapter 37 of the DDJ. Chapter 37 states,

Dao constantly non-acts	道恒無為也
Should nobles and kings be able to hold fast to this,	侯王能守之
The myriad things will be transformed of their own accord.	而萬物將自化
After they are transformed, should desire raise its head,	化而欲作
Press it down with the weight of the nameless uncarved block.	將鎮之以無名之樸
Thereon leave off desiring,	夫亦將知足
In not desiring, achieve tranquility	知足以靜
The myriad things will be at peace of their own accord.	萬物將自定

The self-transformation (*zihua* 自化) of the myriad things here refers to self-soing or spontaneity (*ziran* 自然). A common interpretation of this chapter is to understand the myriad things as humans, that is, people (*wanmin* 萬民) from the perspective of political

philosophy. That is to say, the nobles and kings stay non-acting (*wuwei* 無為) and the people will gain the *ziran* of their nature. However, I do not think we have to be confined to this understanding. The most important thing is that we are aware of the following fact, that is, in classical Chinese, "things" or *wu* 物 contains the meaning of "humans" or *ren* 人, which expresses a different understanding of things. I will explore this point later. Meanwhile, the nobles and kings, and also sages in the DDJ do not have to be understood as "rulers". They can also refer to people who practice the *dao*, which again does not have to be merely personal and therefore unpolitical. In fact, for Laozi, those who can become sages must first of all be practitioners of *dao*; while the practice of *dao* is always political. With respect to human life itself, the realm of spirituality or *jingshen* 精神 and the political dimension are not separate, which is an important feature of Laozi's philosophy. The freedom of spirituality always seeks its political expression, while the expression of political power must be grounded in the freedom of the spirit. For Laozi, those who seek to distinguish hierarchies in society have no legitimacy in politics, which still awaits our attention and further exploration.

An important question that this chapter explores is the relation between things and humans in *dao*. In my view, it is not the case, as is commonly understood, that the spontaneity of the myriad things is a consequence of the nobles and kings emulating the *ziran* or self-soing of the *dao*. The myriad things are spontaneous in themselves. The self-transforming of the myriad things is only disturbed when the kings cannot preserve non-action. Moreover, it is only when humans can preserve their true nature of *ziran* that the *ziran* of *dao* and things can be disclosed to them. Nobles and kings should repress greed and other selfish desires and return to non-be-ing so that there can be peace in the world. "After they are transformed, should desire raise its head, press it down with the weight of the nameless uncarved block." These verses remind us to return to the spontaneity of things at every moment. The "uncarved block" refers to the spontaneity of things. Again, this chapter manifests the conspicuous feature of Laozi's philosophy, that is, it penetrates *dao*, things, and humans. *Dao*, *heng* (constancy), *wuwei*, the *zihua* (self-transformation) of things, and humans' preserving their uncarved block are all spontaneity. The spontaneity of things is the non-action or *wuwei* of *dao*. There is no priority or posterity between them. Any attempt to distinguish priority and posterity between them inevitably separates *dao* and things as two pieces.

The "desire" here first of all refers to that of the practitioner of the dao. It can also be understood generally as human desire. The tension between the rising desire and the spontaneity of *dao* and things becomes salient here. Humans must press down their selfish desire to preserve the uncarved block, i.e., the simplicity in themselves, so that the *ziran* of *dao* and things can be disclosed to them. However, ultimately isn't human desire itself *ziran* or nature? No matter what, how can the human, as one member of the myriad things, oppose nature at all?

In ancient Chinese, the term "things" includes within it the category "humans", though "humans" cannot be used to refer to "things". This is related to the understanding of "things" in Chinese. *Wu* 物 or "thing" in Chinese has the meaning of "event." Things understood from the disclosing of events reveals to us the spontaneity of the nature of things. The spontaneity of the nature of things is the ultimate real event, which determines the extensive use of "thing" in Daoist texts. *Wu* 物 in Daoism penetrates *dao*, things, and humans just like *de* 德, *sheng* 生, *ziran* 自然, etc. Laozi uses *wu* or "thing" to refer to *dao*, calling it *youwu* 有物 (lit. "be-ing thing") and *wuwu* 無物 (literally "non-be-ing thing"). For example, chapter 25 states, "There is a thing (*youwu* 有物), a gathering chaos, emerging before the heavenly and the earthly."[25] Chapter 14 says, " . . . reverts again to non-be-ing (wuwu 無物, literally "no thing")", and also "the form of the formless, and the image of non-being (*wuwu* 無物)".[26] Doubtless, the modern metaphysical perspective that takes things as objects cannot interpret this use of "thing," for *dao* surely is not any "thing" confined in a certain form. From the perspective that things are the disclosing of spontaneity as reality,

however, this use is all natural. Of course, "thing" in the DDJ is also used to refer to the myriad things, which also contains the meaning of "human".

The spontaneity of the myriad things is the ultimate reality. Things understood as such are not objects represented by rational subjects. Rather, humans belong to things; that is to say, human existence takes root in the spontaneity of things. Human existence unfolds in the process of the causal effects and freedom of the spontaneity of things, not the opposite; humans belong to this process, not the opposite; human freedom is contained and grounded in the freedom or spontaneity of the myriad things, not the opposite. In this sense, we say that "nature prescribes laws to humans".

The sun goes and the moon comes; spring arrives and flowers come into bloom; the lotus flowers come out of water in summer; the wild geese fly to the south in autumn; the white snow falls onto the leafless boughs in winter: the spontaneity of the myriad things happens in a way unknown to humans. It is experienceable but cannot be grasped by abstract concepts. We can, of course—and we are always doing so—intercept fragments of spontaneity or nature (*ziran*) with concepts and knowledge. But when these concepts and knowledge are used to oppose and deny nature, we thereby use our confidence in knowledge to complete our ignorance about spontaneity as reality. We therefore firmly belong to nature's game of life and death, for death itself is part of nature.

The spontaneity of things (including human existence) unfolds in relationality, and freedom lies in this process. Things in relationality and causality are expressions of freedom. Take the example we used in the last section. The ocean evaporates and the clouds are generated; the wind blows and the clouds flow; the clouds gather together and the rain falls; and the rain nourishes all myriad things, such that all is in all. In respect to relationality and process, there is no changeless "self", i.e., the discrete, individual things as substances. There is only "us", i.e., the ceaselessly flowing spontaneity of the myriad things. Therefore, Zhuangzi says, "All the myriad things and I are one" ("Qi Wu Lun"). Of course, we can distinguish things with language for the sake of convenience, for example, wind, clouds, rain, and things, etc., for the reason that there is causality in space and time. (I understand causality in a broad sense here as the disclosing of relationality.) Ultimately, however, things are the condensation of creative generativity. The distinctions made by language do not obstruct the oneness of them. The ocean is in the wind and clouds; the wind and clouds are in the rain; and the ocean, wind, clouds, and the rain are all in the myriad things. The concrete is the condensation of the empty; the empty is the dispersion of the concrete. The concrete and the empty generate each other, and change and transformation flow infinitely. There is only spontaneity in itself.

Freedom reveals itself in spontaneity. Freedom permanently abides in the life and death of the myriad things. The life and death of the myriad things is thereon permanent freedom itself. The ceaselessly flowing causality is the self-manifestation of freedom. This illustrates the Buddhist idea of interdependent co-arising and emptiness of Buddha nature (*yuanqixingkong* 緣起性空). The coming-to-be and passing-away of things are formed through causality, or karma, all belonging to spontaneity. That which is empty is nothing but spontaneity in itself.

The causality of things is expressed by "inter-dependence" (*xiangdai* 相待) in the Zhuangzi. For Zhuangzi, one should enter the freedom of "non-dependence" (*wudai* 無待) from inter-dependence; and the freedom of non-dependence discloses itself in the mutually generating and mutually intertwining causality. Therefore, it says,

> "Yin and Yang shine on each other, cover each other, and regulate each the other; the four seasons give place to one another, generate one another, and consume one another. Desires and aversions, the avoidings of this and movements towards that then arise one after another from this process; and from this came the joining of the male and female. Then are seen now security and now insecurity, in mutual change; fortune and misfortune produce each other; gentleness and urgency press on each other; the movements of gathering and dispersion are thus established." (Chen 1983, p. 741)[27]

This is how freedom functions. Take another example of the idea of the *fangsheng* 方生 ("simultaneity of life and death") in the "Qi Wu Lun" ("Equalizing Things"). What *fangsheng* 方生 refers to is the interdependence of all. Zhuangzi states,

> "Simultaneous life is simultaneous death, and vise versa; simultaneous admissibility is simultaneous inadmissibility, and vise versa; what is circumstantially right is also circumstantially wrong, and vise versa." (Chen 1983, p. 62)[28]

The *fang* 方 character here indicates simultaneity. Because of life there is death, and death transforms into life again. Life and death are the same process;[29] because of admissibility there is inadmissibility, and inadmissibility gives rise to admissibility; the affirmation of this is from the negation of that, and from affirmation negation is again generated. The intertwining of cause and effect and the flow of spontaneity are like this. I am in you and you are in me. In the end, there is no clear and distinct boundary between this and that. "Whenever fragmentation is going on, formation, completion, is also going on. Whenever formation is going on, destruction is also going on. Hence, there is no completion or destruction. Things return and are connected to form the oneness" (Chen 1983, p. 69). Change and transformation become infinite in the process of life and death, formation, completion, and destruction. And all is spontaneity.

That *ziran* or spontaneity is *ziyou* 自由or freedom is to say the instantaneous context itself is freedom.[30] Cause and effect is the self-expression of freedom. In this regard, there is an essential similarity between whether a bud is ready to bloom or not, or how it is going to bloom under the sunshine and humans' seeking freedom or keeping silence under oppression. Both are moved by and happen with the perception of the power of spontaneity. Both are the illumination of freedom. This is not, in any case, a denial of freedom in terms of humans' struggle against oppression. Rather, what it says is that the human can only achieve her freedom when she understands and partakes in the ultimate reality. Like spring arrives and flowers come into bloom, where there is oppression, there is resistance. For this reason, the instantaneous context within the interdependent cause and effect is freedom itself. The life and death and love and hate of humans, the shadow of a bird occasionally flying over the green in the bright spring sunshine, or the leaves falling onto the water in the wind, slowly flowing away with the water, are all shining of freedom.

Kant rightly sees that causality is a human construction, that is, one of the "a priori categories". The problem is that the categorical human construct is taken as a disavowal of nature. Nature is merely a representation that has no independent existence outside of human thoughts, while the noumenal nature in itself is excluded from human experience. The fact is, on the contrary, the subjective construct of causality belongs to nature, that is to say, again, cause and effect is an expression of spontaneity itself. In this sense, humans are always experiencing spontaneity as reality. This experience itself belongs to spontaneity. Ultimately, this is spontaneity experiencing spontaneity, that is, the self-experience of spontaneity.

Freedom as the ultimate reality is not merely a human idea or value. Neither is it simply any teleological "freedom from" or "freedom to", even though it does not exclude these kinds of "freedom" that are delineated within the coming and going of cause and effect. Human reason is not the precondition of freedom. It is rather the opposite: spontaneity and freedom as the ultimate reality is the precondition of any form of human existence. Hence, humankind does not possess freedom or dominate nature. On the contrary, as one member of the myriad things, she is ultimately possessed by spontaneity (*ziran*, nature) itself. She, in terms of both her awareness of belonging to nature and her ignorance of forgetting nature, is an expression of spontaneity.

Human essence and freedom are involved in and follow the spontaneity of things. It can only be accomplished with the attainment of the freedom of things. The sea, wind, and clouds summon us to leave the dead sedimentation of historical ideologies, to shatter the idolatry of our own remnants, to break all self-illusions, and to enter eternal freedom. As Saint-John Perse says, "The uninhabitable is our site." (Perse 2014, p. 477) Spontaneity and freedom transcend historicity. Any history has already been and is always cast away and

transcended, and for this reason, is preserved. This is the intrinsic meaning of "historicity." Hence, any effort that seeks some fixed and changeless identity is essentially illusory. Insofar as it departs from freedom, it necessarily causes alienation and oppression. However, this "transcendence" is not a disavowal of historicity. Freedom always discloses within history. What "transcendence" signifies is the fact that history is led by and reflects freedom. The human should understand henceforth preserve this matter of fact in her own existence. What "transcendence" shows is that historicity is freedom.

The spontaneity of things is the ground that human freedom takes root in. Human freedom can never be achieved through the denial and dominance over things. In fact, the self-understanding of humans is involved in the understanding of things. The oppression of humans in history goes hand in hand with the interpretation of things. Thereon in Chinese history, the hierarchical order in society is set up through the cosmological order. As is famously put at the beginning of the Xici commentary,

> "Heaven is lofty and honourable; earth is low. Thus *Qian* 乾 and *Kun* 坤[31] are settled (in accordance with this). Things low and high appear display in a similar relation. The noble and mean, have their places assigned accordingly." (Li 1994, p. 541)

The hierarchical interpretation of the cosmological order serves the purpose of the social hierarchy setups. In the West, the oppression of women and the dominance of nature go together. Hence, nature is taken as the passive matter and also as female, etc.[32] The self-understanding of the human mirrors their understanding of nature. Hierarchical values are often grounded on hierarchical interpretations of nature. As I have shown, the Daoist view of the relation between things and humans sees humans as belonging to nature. Consequently, humans' liberation lies in the realization of the spontaneity of nature. This is why both Laozi and Zhuangzi set the spontaneity of things as the ground for the freedom of humans.

Notwithstanding, when we talk about humans' belonging to nature, a common misunderstanding arises right away. With a defensive attitude, it is taken as a denial of the technological existence of the modern human. This misunderstanding originates from the metaphysics that puts nature as the opposite of humans, which, in the end, is an anthropocentric self-construction of the human ego. The quest for human essence in some metaphysics, e.g., Plato's reason, the modern subject sought through the cognition of self-consciousness, etc., is nothing but the self-construction of the human ego. Insofar as this "self" understands itself as the opposite of things and nature, thereupon making human technology the denial of nature, it constitutes the deepest ignorance of humans: the modern man believes that he can, with the power of instrumental reason, be the master of nature, and control, channel and drive nature to proceed in the direction of his will.

However, humans primarily belong to nature. Therefore, any efforts to dominate nature have from the beginning constituted humanity's self-subjugation. When humans seek to control things, they thereby first of all have completed a self-constraint; when humans deny things, they have simultaneously completed self-denial, even though it is presented as a way of self-construction. Thereupon, we see that the violence against things and the reification of humans in capitalist industrial production are the same process. In our time, with such powerful and advanced science and technology, for which humans are so proud of themselves, the global situation is only worsening. Nuclear weapons, bio-weapons, pollution, global warming, water depletion, and so on are all problems that are brought forth by modern science and technology and are now threatening human existence and forcing us to foresee, actually, an end of human history.

Human existence and human history are part of the spontaneity of things. Our denial of things belongs to the self-denial of nature, that is, the unconcealment and creativity of spontaneity itself. As we mentioned above, death is part of nature. In this regard, modern technology accomplishes a self-expression of nature in its exploitation of nature. In terms of human history, however, this self-expression of nature is the self-eradication of human existence. That is, when the modern human postulates themselves as the opposite of na-

ture, they have thereby departed from the root of their own existence. The technological human history against nature is the very event of the eradication of human existence.

5. Conclusions

However, isn't the power of spontaneity still flowing even in a desert of a Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) plant farm? Even though the growth of plants is controlled by chemicals and the procedure of their life is transmuted by technology, every leaf still grows towards sunlight, and their roots still seek the nourishment of the earth. All possibilities of control, regulation, and "modification" are rooted in nature itself. Ultimately, humans can only follow nature, and any technology is possible only because it has grasped some power of nature. It is impossible for humans to obtain power through the control and domination of nature, which is unfortunately the biggest illusion of modern metaphysics and the time that it defines. Power can only be attained through our belonging to nature, because there is no power except for nature.

When our belonging to nature is emphasized, there is always concern about the human. But where are humans now? Are we then to be erased for the sake of the earth? Should we forget technology and go back to a primitive way of living like the Amish? As a response to these worries, I want to stress that the awareness of our belonging to nature is not to say that we should abandon technology. Rather, for humans to restore the root of our existence in the present historical context, technology needs to seek integration with nature. Science and technology like to wear the masks of objectivity and neutrality. The fact is, however, that any science and technology are the result and practice of a certain metaphysics and epistemology. Furthermore, metaphysics, science, and technology are tightly associated with the political and economic system. Hence, what technology needs to be developed or repressed is determined by whether the monopoly capitalist groups can make profits and the number of profits to be generated in the capitalist industrial system. The so-called objective science and technology serve the interests of a small special group of people.[33] Therefore, we see that a large amount of scientific research has been invested in the military industry, hence high-tech weapons and endless imperialist wars, ever craving for more blood of the numberless. Meanwhile, even though the destruction brought by GMOs has been largely proven and the consequences are unpredictable, GMOs as a means to control both domestic and international economy and to make high profits, have gained wide support from many governments. At the same time, the green technologies that reduce pollution, foster life health, and are urgently needed for sustainability are widely suppressed because they harm the benefits of the monopoly groups.

What is more dangerous is the politicization of the environmental crisis. With their ostensible proclamations of dealing with the crisis and without any substantial moves, the world's politicians are only using the crisis of the existence of all beings as propaganda to enhance control over people internationally. For example, on 13 April 2021, Japan's government announced a decision to dump 1.25 million tons of radioactive wastewater from the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant into the Pacific Ocean in two years. It has started in the spring of 2023. At an international time such as ours, it is not difficult for politicians and experts to sit down and come up with a practical plan to deal with this issue. However, despite the fact that in China, Korea, and Russia there are widespread concerns for and fear of the unpredictable contamination of the oceans and the atmosphere caused by the radioactive chemicals contained in nuclear waste, US State Secretary Antony Blinken thanked Japan "for its transparent efforts in its decision to dispose of the treated water from the Fukushima Daiichi site" on Twitter. Here we have a glimpse of the disastrous effect of the politicization of environmental crisis: because Japan is viewed as an ally of the allegedly democratic white states, its nuclear waste is propagandized as "correct." Its dire and unpredictable pollution of the earth, the ocean, and the atmosphere should then be merrily forgotten.[34]

That nature becomes the object of human reason and that nature becomes the raw material for profits, the weight to be sold in political struggle, delineate the same process of industrial capitalism from the different aspects of philosophy, politics, and economics.[35]

While the many political struggles may never end, the world needs to understand that there is a realm in which people have to put down their politics and come together for the future of the human race. And that realm is nature, the home of the human. Until now, we have seen no political efforts taken to solve this problem, and we therefore hope to see them in the near future.

It is also true that global environmental awareness has been growing in our era. Environmentalists have written books and have been protesting on streets, in museums and supermarkets, on dams, and have chained themselves to buildings. Finally, the world is turning its attention to developing new technologies for green energy. Wind turbines have been set up and solar panels installed; electric vehicles have become a new fashion. It is said that nowadays the organic way of living is even preferred by capitalists, instead of only by a small group of leftist radicals. These are good phenomena that should be cherished, for they are the results of generations of hard work. However, the green trends are still weak, and the philosophical ground of nature on which the human future stands is still awaiting to be established, which is what I am trying to do in this essay. We need enough awareness to understand that if we were to fail, the future of the human race could be easily blown away. The integration of technology and nature is not only necessary, but also urgent.

The Daoist understanding of the relation between things and humans, i.e., our ultimate belonging to nature, requires the reflection of our very existence. Human history is not independent of or outside of the event of spontaneity; rather, it belongs to nature and is itself an expression of nature. Henceforth, the opening of a more free, good, beautiful, and healthy time demands us to break the illusions of the human ego. It demands the awareness of our belonging to nature.

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Glossary

jingjie 境界	boundary: limit, area, domain
ziran 自然	spontaneity, self-going, nature (in modern Chinese)
shi 實	real, concrete
zhenshi 真實	true and real
fa 法	law, to take measure from, to follow
xu 虛	empty
chong 沖	empty, surge, infuse
du 篤	concrete, true, genuine
heng 恒	constant, consistent
guan 觀	observe
fu 復	return, back and forth
ming 明	bright, light
jing 靜	serene, peaceful, quiet, gentle
ru 如	suchness, as it is
jiujingshixiang 究竟實相	the ultimate true form, the ultimate reality
de 德	virtue, creativity
yi 易	change, easy

you 有	being, have
wu 無	nonbeing, not have, absence, not
qi 器	instrument
de 得	get, gain, satisfied
xuan 玄	dark, mysterious
dao 道	road, way, path, to speak, to lead
shan 善	good, virtuous, kind
xin 信	trust, credible, believe
xing 性	nature, character, sex
sheng 生	life, growth, living, birth
yangsheng 養生	nourishing life
hua 化	transform, change
wuchang 無常	impermanent
ziyou 自由	freedom
wu 物	thing, creature
xiangdai 相待	interdependence
wudai 無待	non-dependence

Notes

1 I understand "the myriad things" here in terms of the Buddhist idea of "realm" (*jingjie* 境界), under the perspective of which it is not merely the sum total of things, nor is it only a subjective human experience, but the realization of diversity.

2 I am here following Nietzsche's and Heidegger's critique of the Western metaphysical tradition. Plato's world of Being, Aristotle's substance, and "the unmoved mover" manifested as a God beyond the world in Christianity are its main targets. Heidegger also criticized modern metaphysics for its objectification of the world. See Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture". (Heidegger 2002, p. 57)

3 " 處其實, 不居其華."

4 My translation with reference to (Ames and Hall 2003; Lau 1963). For the Chinese texts of the *Daodejing* (DDJ) cited in this article, I combine different versions and come up with what I think as ideal. I usually give preference to the Mawangdui Silk Texts. See 劉笑敢, < 老子古今: 五種對勘與析評引論>, 中国社会科学出版社, (Liu 2006) and (Zhu 2012).The *chong* 沖 character in the second verse is a reading that follows the Han Dynasty Bamboo Scripts. In all other versions, the *jing* 靜 character is taken. There are a few reasons that I follow this reading. First, the Bamboo Script was earlier than other versions. Second, the *chong* character (meaning "emptiness") resonates with *xu* 虛 (meaning also "being empty") in the first line. Third, *chong* is an important character for description of the Dao in the DDJ. For example, chapter 4 says, "Dao is empty (chong 沖), yet its use is never to be drained".

5 *Du* in Chinese means concreteness or truthfulness as in the word *dushi* 篤實, meaning concrete and true. Erya·Shigu says, "*Du* means to make concrete and strong" (" 篤, 固也.").

6 In the sense that these two terms do not mean a metaphysical void but rather depict the movement of the dao, the emptiness here should be understood as a throbbing one that designates the flow of all beings.

7 " 反其真." See "The Great Master" and "Autumn Floods." The zhen or "being true" in the Zhuangzi covers different levels of ontology, existence, and epistemology. However, in my view they are all grounded in the ultimate reality (zhenshi 真實) itself, for the reason of which the zhenzai 真宰 (true master), zhenren 真人 (true person), zhenzhi 真知 (true knowing), and zhenxing 真性 (true nature) become possible at all. Being true therefore pervades dao, de, things, and humans. Because of the truth or zhen of dao and de, there is the zhen or truth of things (as Tian Dao ("The Heavenly Way") says, "penetrates to the truth of things", i.e., jiwuzhizhen 極物之真), and that of humans.

8 " 日新之謂盛德, 生生之謂易".

9 " 天地之大德曰生."

10 The *qi* 器 in the DDJ certainly should not be simply understood as "instrument"; rather, instruments have to be redefined through qi 器. *Qi* depicts the *you* 有 or be-ing of all. Chapter 28 says that "when the uncarved block shatters it becomes vessels 樸散則為器". The *pu* or uncarved block implies the dao as wu or non-be-ing, while the qi shows its be-ing or becoming. Laozi also refers to the event of the world as the sacred qi (" 天下神器"), which also stresses the disclosing of all. It is for this reason that the latter versions of the DDJ, e.g., Wang Bi's version, use *shi* 勢 instead of *qi* 器. The *shi* grasps the becoming of things through the propensity or power that involves and shapes a certain thing or event.

11 Edited translation from (Ames and Hall 2003).

12 It is a characteristic of Chinese philosophy to use different words to depict the same event of nature, e.g., *dao, de, tian, ziran, sheng* etc. These terms, therefore, should be taken as aspectual that entail each other rather than analytic categories that seek definitions through setting boundaries. I got this idea from Roger T. Ames.

13 Please check the reference: Ziporyn's translation. (Ziporyn 2009).

14 Please check the reference: Ibid.
15 My translation. " 魚相造乎水, 人相造乎道. 相造乎水者, 穿池而養給. 相造乎道者, 無事而生定".
16 " 天下誘然皆生, 而不知其所以生".
17 " 開天者德生, 開人者賊生".
18 " 大道汎兮其可左右. 萬物恃之而生".
19 <說卦傳>, " 雷以动之, 风以散之, 雨以润之, 日以烜之".
20 This is inspired by Dogen Zenji, "Only a True Flower Shows Its True Face" in Shōbōgenzō, vol. 4, Tokyo: Kosen (Nishiyama 1983, p. 110).
21 This is the foundation of the understanding of true nature of things as emptiness in Buddhism. Emptiness is suchness. Suchness is emptiness.
22 Shi Puji, ed., Volume 7 of the *Compendium of the Five Lamps*. [玄沙大師參次, 聞燕子聲, 乃曰, " 深談實相, 善說法要." 便下座.] See (Puji n.d.).
23 Bertrand Russell gives us a good account of the "removal of almost all traces of animism from the laws of physics" in modern science in his *A History of Western Philosophy*. See (Russell 1945, p. 537).
24 A priori knowledge, according to Kant, is "knowledge that is absolutely independent of all experience" (CPR, B3).
25 " 有物混成, 先天地生".
26 " 復歸於無物", and " 無狀之狀, 無物之象".
27 " 陰陽相照, 相蓋, 相治, 四時相代, 相生, 相殺, 欲惡去就於是橋起, 雌雄片合於是庸有. 安危相易, 禍福相生, 緩急相摩, 聚散以成". (Ze Yang 則陽) My translation.
28 " 方生方死, 方死方生; 方可方不可, 方不可方可; 因是因非, 因非因是". My translation.
29 There are different interpretations of this obscure line. Zhong Tai, for example understands it as the arising and passing away of opinions. See (Zhong 2002, p. 39).
30 *Ziran* 自然 is ultimately freedom. There are layers of meanings to this point. *Ziran* is not simply what is experienced. Rather what is experienced is always under certain biases constructed by social norms. For Daoism, we have to get rid of knowing or *zhi* 知 to reach *ziran*. Such is the practice of *wuzhi* 無知 (non-knowing). The world is as it is, yet we live in categories and concepts shaped by the society. For Daoism, it is only when these biases and categories are expelled can freedom and *ziran* be achieved.
31 *Qian* 乾 and *Kun* 坤 are the two fundamental hexagrams in the *Yijing*, respectively symbolizing heaven and earth.
32 That the degradation of nature and the dominion over women go hand in hand in Western history is a fundamental viewpoint of ecofeminism. See (Plumwood 1993, pp. 93–103). See also (Merchant 1983, pp. 164–92).
33 See (Shiva 1989, p. 23). See also (Allen 2010). Allen insightfully points out that "the problem is not with machines but with the ethics of engineering and the government of technology".
34 Despite the plant's operator, the Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s claim that the wastewater is safe, the level of tritium remains above national standard. (Tsoi 2023) According to environmental groups, "The water in the storage tanks contains unknown quantities of radioactive contaminants besides tritium". (Kuhn 2021) Japan has been criticized for its lack of transparency and an undemocratic decision-making process. According to Greenpeace Japan, "Rather than using the best available technology to minimize radiation hazards by storing and processing the water over the long term, they have opted for the cheapest option, dumping the water into the Pacific Ocean". (Elton 2023)
35 I do not exclusively criticize capitalism on the issue of environmental crisis. Both capitalism and communism, the two major modern regimes, are responsible. For a detailed analysis of this issue see (Liu 2022).

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Juedi Tiantong: The Religious Basis of the Relationship between *Tian* and Man in Ancient China

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Abstract: *Juedi Tiantong* occurred in ancient China and was the critical foundation for understanding the relationship between *Tian* and man in China. From the perspective of conceptual history, *Juedi Tiantong* not only shaped the metaphysical dimension of the concept of *Tian*, but also transformed the original religious form of communication between man and natural gods into the unity of human nature and *Tiandao*, which liberated the relationship between *Tian* and man from the religious field. Therefore, *Juedi Tiantong* should be regarded as the critical basis of the unity of heaven and man in Chinese philosophy. Furthermore, as an important religious revolution, *Juedi Tiantong* also affected people's understanding of nature, which was mainly reflected in the recognition of astronomy and calendar reform. In ancient China, it was difficult to distinguish between humanity and astronomy, science and religion, and rationality and divinity. In this case, *Juedi Tiantong* also abstracted *Tian*, originally representing the physical sky, into a metaphysical concept. Accordingly, the concept of *Tian* in Chinese philosophy has not developed the same meaning of nature as Western civilization.

Keywords: *Juedi Tiantong*; the relationship between *tian* and man; religion; nature; the unity of heaven and man

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1. Introduction

Juedi Tiantong 絕地天通 (the severance between *Tian* and man) was a religion-based reform of great significance that happened in ancient China. The exact time of this religious reform is still subject to debate among historians, but most scholars agree that Zhuanxu 顓頊, the leader of *Juedi Tiantong*, lived during the period from approximately 3000 B.C. to 2500 B.C. (Z. Wang 2013, p. 381). The main reason for this revolution was likely due to the war that occurred during the integration of tribal states at that time (D. Yu 2005, pp. 11–18). This was a religious revolution, lasting hundreds of years, which changed the relationship between *Tian* 天 and man. *Juedi Tiantong* literally means the severance of communication between *Tian* and man. Before *Juedi Tiantong*, all shamans were able to invite and talk to the gods at any time. However, Zhuanxu, the martial and political leader with the highest prestige at that time, announced a religious policy that only himself and a few designated shamans were allowed to communicate with *Tian* and all other people were prohibited from sacrificing themselves to *Tian*.

As a major religious reform in ancient China, *Juedi Tiantong* has always been a hot topic among scholars. Chinese scholar Liang Tao 梁濤 once summarized that the academic articles discussing the influence of *Juedi Tiantong* can be broadly divided into three categories, namely, the theory of religious reform represented by Xu Xusheng 徐旭生, the theory on the monopoly of political rights represented by Zhang Guangzhi 張光直, and the theory on the specialization of *Wu* 巫 (shaman) represented by Chen Lai 陳來 (Liang 2022, pp. 47–54). The first category focuses on the religious issues and aims to explore the ideological changes brought about by *Juedi Tiantong*. Xu Xusheng 徐旭生 believes that Zhuanxu transformed primitive shamanism into a progressive religion, and the establishment of this religion system enabled the rapid development of Chinese culture (Xu 2023,

p. 31). Liu Wei 劉偉 believes that *Juedi Tiantong* was a religious event, rather than a simple historical event. This religious reform made the shamans specialized and the kingship sanctified, which facilitated the formation and maturity of the ancient state religion, and also preserved the core elements of the original shamanism (W. Liu 2021, pp. 125–32). The second research category focuses on the political issues and discusses the monopoly of political power demonstrated by *Juedi Tiantong*. Yang Xiangkui 楊向奎 believes that *Juedi Tiantong* meant that "the King monopolized the mediators between *Shangdi* 上帝 and human" (X. Yang 1962, p. 164), which implied the monopoly of political power through religious reform. On this basis, Zhang Guangzhi 張光直 further explored the construction of political authority and argued that "this mythological story provided clues to the central role of shamans in ancient Chinese politics. After *Juedi Tiantong*, only those who controlled the path to *Tian* had enough wisdom and political power to rule the state" (G. Zhang 2016, p. 36). The third research category focuses on the specialization of shamans in ancient China and discusses the transformation of shamanic culture. In *Ancient Religion and Ethics: The Root of Confucianism*, Chen Lai 陳來 regards shamanic culture as the source of Confucianism and regards *Juedi Tiantong* as an important link between shamanism and Confucianism (L. Chen 1996, p. 5). Chen believes that *Juedi Tiantong* resulted in the specialization of shamans, after which ritual specialists became the only group eligible to communicate with *Tian*. Li Xiaoguang 李小光 believes that Zhuanxu's reform realized a monopoly in terms of the path to *Tian*, but did not realize the unity of beliefs, which resulted in the establishment of polytheistic religion in China (X. Li 2008, pp. 138–41). Zhang Zhen 張震 and Su Huimi 蘇薈敏 argue that *Juedi Tiantong* was a starting point in the self-awareness of shamans and that this event was of great aesthetic significance that could not be ignored (Zhang and Su 2016, pp. 29–33+124).

Foreign scholars have also paid attention to the study of *Juedi Tiantong*. For instance, Yujin Lee believes that *Juedi Tiantong* can be understood from both historical and mythological perspectives, but the real value of the material concerns its implied historical authenticity (Lee 2002, pp. 445–71). Gilles Boileau believes that *Juedi Tiantong* brought order and differentiation to religious matters, in line with the late Zhou ideology of sacrifice and religion. *Wu*, as the head of a hierarchy of officers, appeared to be an elaboration of the relationship between religion and society, relevant within the framework of the ritual thinking of this period, particularly the ideology of sacrifice (Boileau 2002, pp. 350–78). Michael J. Puett also focused on the transition of shamans into ritual specialists caused by *Juedi Tiantong*; he argued that spirits and humans should be separated and placed within a proper hierarchy of functions and, after *Juedi Tiantong*, *Wu* were not shamans at all (Puett 2022, p. 107).

In recent years, more and more scholars have begun to pay attention to the relationship between *Tian* and man contained within *Juedi Tiantong*. Zhang Rulun 張汝倫 believes that *Juedi Tiantong* played a critical role in modeling the relationship between *Tian* and man (R. Zhang 2019, pp. 52–58). Zhao Guangming 趙廣明 believes that from *Juedi Tiantong* to *Zhili Zuoyue* 制禮作樂 (the establishment of a system of rites and music), the king was able to construct a rights-based social hierarchy by utilizing the relationship between *Tian* and man. This tradition was strengthened by Confucius, and the relationship between *Tian* and man was finally justified by Zhuangzi 庄子 (G. Zhao 2023, pp. 11–20). Xiao Qi 肖琦 believes that understanding *Juedi Tiantong* as the process of specialization of shamans or the centralization of imperial power does not correspond with its original meaning. *Juedi Tiantong* which is recorded in *Shangshu*, the *Lüxing* chapter 尚書·呂刑reflected that Chong 重 and Li's 黎 tribe defeated the tribe of Miao 苗, which is consistent with the Mandate of Heaven of Zhou, and is also not in conflict with the concept of the unity of heaven and man (Xiao 2019, pp. 37–43). As a ban on religion, *Juedi Tiantong* literally means cutting off communication between the people on earth and the gods in heaven, the consequence of which should be the creation of a pure, secularized political and social pattern, rather than the traditional Chinese concept of the continuity of heaven and man. Just as Li Ling 李零 said: "Literally, *Juedi Tiantong* should be called the division of *Tian* and man. It was

strange to translate '*jue*' 絶 (isolation) into '*he*' 合 (unity)" (L. Li 2000, p. 13). However, in fact, what *Juedi Tiantong* truly expressed was the exact process by which our Chinese ancestors clearly distinguished between nature and civilization, while still maintaining a vague relationship between the two. Just as *Zhouyi, Bi Gua* 周易·賁卦 (*The Zhou Book of Change*, *The Bi Hexagram*) said: "we observe the ornamental figures of the sky, and thereby ascertain the changes of the seasons. We look at the ornamental observances of the society, and understand how people are well educated" 觀乎天文, 以察時變; 觀乎人文, 以化成天下. On the one hand, our Chinese ancestors' construction of the social order had never been divorced from their understanding and imitation of the order of *Tiandao* 天道. On the other hand, *Juedi Tiantong* drew a clear boundary between man and gods, which meant that social and political affairs would be completely governed by humans themselves. This religious orientation encouraged Chinese philosophers to look for the root of value within human society rather than outside it, while *Tian* was still revered as a supreme god. This tradition is completely different from the values proclaimed by Western Christianity, where God is the only source of value.

The term nature was always absent in traditional Chinese philosophy, and the ancient Chinese people's understanding of nature was mainly reflected in the evolution of the relationship between *Tian* and man. The explanation of the relationship between *Tian* and man contained in *Juedi Tiantong* is conducive to a demonstration of the essence of the unity of heaven and man in ancient China and will provide a new perspective to understand the relationship between man and nature among different civilizations. Based on previous research outcomes, this article will conduct analysis from the perspective of conceptual history and philosophy, rather than regarding *Juedi Tiantong* as a purely historical event, which can better clarify the link between China's ancient shamanism and Confucianism. This article aims to analyze the impact of *Juedi Tiantong* on the relationship between *Tian* and humans in ancient China, in order to shed light on how *Juedi Tiantong* influenced ancient Chinese people's understanding of nature, and explore the reason why the term Ziran 自然 (nature) in Chinese philosophy is different from the term nature in modern Western ecological civilization. This article is mainly divided into five parts: the first part is the introduction, including a basic background on *Juedi Tiantong*. In the second part, the evolution of the concept of *Tian* will be interpreted. The third part will further explain the transformation of the mode of communication between *Tian* and man after *Juedi Tiantong*, in order to interpret how the communication mode changed from the original religious link to ethical and philosophical unity. The fourth part will discuss how *Juedi Tiantong* preserved the key elements of shamanic culture, which resulted in the absence of "nature" in traditional Chinese philosophy. Lastly, the conclusion will be explained.

2. *Juedi Tiantong* and the Metaphysical *Tian*

The reason why there are various explanations of *Tianrenheyi* 天人合一 (the unity of heaven and man) is the ambiguity concerning the connotation of *Tian*. In *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 (*Annotations on the Chinese Characters*), *Tian* is interpreted as "the supreme". It can be seen that *Tian* originally referred to the largest and the highest of something. However, different philosophers interpret *Tian* according to different dimensions.[1] One of the most important effects of *Juedi Tiantong* on the relationship between *Tian* and man was the shaping of the metaphysical dimension of *Tian*. This section will analyze how *Juedi Tiantong* made *Tian* metaphysical.

2.1. Juedi Tiantong as a Key Event in Conceptual History

The term *Juedi Tiantong* was first mentioned in the chapter *Lüxing* 呂刑 (*The Marquis of Lü on Punishments*) in the *Shangshu* 尚書 (*The Book of Documents*), and other literature on this event included *Guoyu Chuyu* 國語·楚語 (*The Discourses of the States, The Discourses of the State of Chu*) and *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* 山海經. In fact, *Juedi Tiantong* was not a simple concept, but a religious reform lasting hundreds of years, which had exerted an important influence on Chinese conceptual history. It is said that *Lüxing* was written at the

time of King Mu of Zhou 周穆王 (r. 976–922BC), but the actual time of writing of the book is still unclear. According to Gu Jiegang's 顧頡剛 deduction, *Lüxing* was written at a time when the belief in gods was prevalent, while *Chuyu* was written at a time when the belief in gods was less popular (Gu and Liu 2005, pp. 1950–51). Therefore, logically, *Lüxing* was written first.

However, if we analyze *Juedi Tiantong* purely from the perspective of history, we are bound to enter into a dilemma. It is difficult to prove the historical authority of that ancient period. Huang Yushun 黃玉順 once suggested that this conceptual event marked the initial construction of Chinese metaphysics in the axial period (Huang 2005, pp. 8–11). Indeed, it is more reasonable to analyze *Juedi Tiantong* from the perspective of conceptual history, and the establishment of metaphysics[2] is closely related to the change in the connotation of *Tian*. *Lüxing* states that:

> According to the teachings of ancient times, Chi You 蚩尤 was the first to produce disorder, which spread among the quiet, orderly people, till all became robbers and murderers, owl-like and yet self-complacent in their conduct, traitors and villains, snatching and filching, dissemblers and oppressors. Among the people of Miao, they did not use the power of goodness, but the restraint of punishments. They made the five punishments engines of oppression, calling them the laws. They slaughtered the innocent, and were the first also to go to excess in cutting off the nose, cutting off the ears, castration, and branding. All who became liable to those punishments were dealt with without distinction, no difference being made in favor of those who could offer some excuse. The people were gradually affected by this state of things, and became dark and disorderly. Their hearts were no more set on good faith, but they violated their oaths and covenants. The multitudes who suffered from the oppressive terrors, and were (in danger of) being murdered, declared their innocence to Heaven. God surveyed the people, and there was no fragrance of virtue arising from them, but the rank odor of their (cruel) punishments. The great Emperor compassionated the innocent multitudes that were (in danger of) being murdered, and made the oppressors fell the terrors of his majesty. He restrained and (finally) extinguished the people of Miao, so that they should not continue to future generations. Then he commissioned Zhong and Li to make an end of the communications between earth and heaven; and the descents (of spirits) ceased. From the princes down to the inferior officers, all helped with clear intelligence (the spread of) the regular principles of duty, and the solitary and widows were no longer overlooked (translated by Legge 2013, p. 369).

According to this statement, the cause of *Juedi Tiantong* was the destruction of the social order, namely the political war caused by Chiyou's tribe. In order to survive, people prayed to *Shangdi* 上帝for help. In this context, *Shangdi* announced a religion ban, which separated *Tian* 天 (the world of the gods) and *Di* 地 (human society) from each other. In other words, *Juedi Tiantong* caused a change, from the mixture of humans and gods (minshen zarou 民神雜糅) to the separation of humans and gods (*renshenxiangfen* 人神相分). *Juedi Tiantong* acclaimed the absolute boundary between *Tian* and humans, which contributed to the formation of the metaphysical connotation of *Tian*.

2.2. The Integration of Tian and Shangdi

From the perspective of conceptual history, *Juedi Tiantong* reflects the transformation from the primitive polytheistic belief system to a religion with a supreme god. In this process, *Tian* 天 gradually intermingled with *Shangdi* 上帝 and became a supreme god. Originally, *Tian* referred to the world of ghosts and gods in general, which also meant that there was no hierarchy of the gods in ancient people's thoughts. Chen Lai 陳來 also said that the most ancient pattern of sacrifice was probably the worship of power or objects in nature (L. Chen 2002, pp. 18–24). But after *Juedi Tiantong*, kingship in the human world with absolute political authority occurred. Correspondingly, *Tian* became the supreme god

(*Di* 帝), exercising control over all other gods. Chen Yun 陳贇 pointed out that, "In fact, the analysis of *Juedi Tiantong*, to some extent, involved the relationship between Shen 神 (gods) and *Di* 帝. On the one hand, Shen 神 were actually the ancestral gods of the various tribes and they were also the shamans with highest privilege in the tribe—the kings. On the other hand, *Di* 帝 had the higher position than ancestral gods, and *Di* was the only person eligible to sacrifice to *Tian*, namely the emperor in a later dynasty. The political and martial wars among tribes and states were ended by the construction of a hierarchy of gods" (Y. Chen 2010, pp. 16–23). Before *Juedi Tiantong*, people and gods were mixed, and all the people were able to communicate with the gods through shamans. At this time, the gods were diversified, and there was no absolute supreme god. After *Juedi Tiantong*, the communication between humans and gods had been cut off by the king, and political power coincided exactly with religious power.

The literal meaning of *Tian* is the physical sky above the earth, but from the inscriptions on bones from the Shang dynasty, it is obvious that *Tian* became a target of worship. Chao Fulin 晁福林 argued that *Tian*, during the Shang dynasty, was represented by *Di*, and *Tian* was a synonym of *Di* (Chao 2016, pp. 130–46). Jana S. Rošker said: "In the Shang Dynasty, *Tian* became the supreme deity of the state religion, and this did not change significantly until the period marking the transition from the Western to the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (eighth century B.C.)" (Rošker 2023). Furthermore, *Tian* during the Shang dynasty was likely to be a combination of natural gods and ancestral gods. "The highest god is transformed from the gods closely related to natural life" (Lü 1994, p. 664). Guo Moruo 郭沫若 once said: "the Yin people believed that *Tian* and *Di* were the supreme god with human emotions, who were able to make decisions according to its own preferences" (Guo 2005, p. 7). Such belief in *Tian* was adopted by Zhou from the Shang. *Tian* did not lose its position as a supreme god until the Spring and Autumn period. According to Yu Yingshi 余英時, the real target of China's axial breakthrough was the shaman culture rather than the culture of rituals and music. After the breakthrough, the various emerging schools of thought during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period constructed a very different *Tian*, which was usually called Dao 道 (Y. Yu 2014, p. 32).

2.3. The Establishment of the Metaphysical Dimension of Tian

Juedi Tiantong also meant the establishment of the metaphysical dimension of *Tian*. Since then, *Tian* has become a form of absolute transcendence. According to Roger T. Ames, strict transcendence, in mainstream Western civilization, can be understood from the perspective of philosophy or theology. It asserts that an independent and superordinate principle A originates, determines and sustains B, where the reverse is not the case. Such transcendence renders B absolutely dependent upon A and, thus, it is nothing in itself (Ames 2016, p. 3). However, the relevance of such a strict form of transcendence to Chinese traditional philosophy is controversial. It is more appropriate to conceive *Tian* as a form of transcendence within the context of Confucian ethics, which has weakened the personality of *Tian* as a transcendent god but has partly preserved the sacredness of *Tian*. The reason why this metaphysical transition occurred was that *Juedi Tiantong* changed the mixture of humans and gods to a separation of the two and placed *Tian* far away from the human world. Political leaders monopolized the right to sacrifice themselves to *Tian* by staging a religious revolution, making *Tian* exclusive to political leaders and isolated from civilians. A consequence of the religious reform was the weakening of the personality of *Tian*. As Yao Zhongqiu 姚中秋 claimed *Tian* represented total supremacy over the others. All the gods were dominated by *Tian*. However, civilians were not allowed to talk to or hear from *Tian*. Zhuanxu made sacrifices to the silent and speechless *Tian*, shaping the fundamental features of the subsequent religious system in China. "The personality of the gods in China was weak, and even *Tian* was depersonalized" (Yao 2022, pp. 59–68). Before *Juedi Tiantong*, people believed that gods could talk, and shamans were the mediators, who were able to convey the instructions of the gods. The gods played a critical role in guiding people's daily lives. However, after *Juedi Tiantong*, the personality of *Tian* had declined

and the religious attributes of *Tian* were replaced by morality. Wang Ka 王卡 claims that *Tian* should be regarded as the nominal god (K. Wang 2016, pp. 23–26).

The victory of Zhou over Yin resulted in the rethinking of the worship of *Tian* among politicians in the early Zhou period. The Duke of Zhou (周公) proposed the theory of matching *Tian* with moral virtues (*Yidepeitian* 以德配天) to explain the transition of the Mandate of Heaven from Yin to Zhou. The Duke of Zhou said "Oh! God (dwelling in) the great heavens has changed his decree respecting his great son and the great dynasty of Yin. Our king has received that decree. Unbounded is the happiness connected with it, and unbounded is the anxiety: Oh! how can he be other than reverent?" (Shangshu, Zhaogao, translated by Legge 2013, p. 255) 嗚呼！皇天上帝，改厥元子茲大國殷之命，惟王受命，無疆惟休，亦無疆惟恤 (尚書·召誥).

The Duke of Zhou announced the royal will to the officers of the Shang dynasty, saying: "The king speaks to this effect: — 'Ye numerous officers who remain from the dynasty of Yin, great ruin came down on Yin from the cessation of forbearance in compassionate Heaven, and we, the lords of Zhou, received its favoring decree. We felt charged with its bright terrors, carried out the punishments which kings inflict, rightly disposed of the appointment of Yin, and finished (the work of) God" (Shangshu, Duoshi, translated by Legge 2013, p. 275) 爾殷遺多士！弗吊旻天，大降喪于殷。我有周佑命，將天明威，致王罰，敕殷命，終于帝 (尚書·多士).

It can be seen that the Duke of Zhou did not deny the absolute authority of *Tian*, and the victory of Zhou over Yin was closely related to the transformation of the Mandate of Heaven from Yin to Zhou. Moreover, the Duke of Zhou stressed that "The fact simply was, that, for want of the virtue of reverence, the decree in its favor permanently fell to the ground" (Shangshu, Zhaogao, translated by Legge 2013, p. 259) 惟不敬厥德,乃早墜厥命 (尚書·召誥). Apparently, the people in the Zhou dynasty believed that *Tian* would deprive the king without virtue of his authority. Religion began to be linked with morality.

Then, in the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, with a strong sense of responsibility for preserving the culture of the Zhou dynasty, Confucius kept parts of the transcendent religious feature of *Tian*, but, at the same time, did not regard *Tian* as a kind of external power influencing the practices of nature. On the one hand, Confucius showed great reverence and awe in regard to *Tian* and the Mandate of Heaven. Confucius said, "He who does not understand the will of Heaven cannot be regarded as a gentleman" (The Analects, Yao Yue, translated by Waley 2008, p. 233) 不知命，無以為君子也 (論語·堯曰). On the other hand, Confucius regarded *Tian* as a speechless supreme god, without a strong personality. Confucius said, "Heaven does not speak; yet the four seasons run their course thereby, the hundred creatures, each after its kind, are born thereby. Heaven does no speaking!" (The Analects, Yang Huo, Translated by Waley 2008, p. 205) 天何言哉？四時行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉？《論語·陽貨》. *Tian* dominated the alternation of the four seasons and the birth and termination of all creatures, but *Tian* was always silent. Therefore, it is more reasonable to regard *Tian* in Confucius' thoughts as a metaphysical conception, rather than a transcendent god. Just as Tang Junyi 唐君毅 said, "The Chinese as a people have not embraced a concept of "Heaven" (tian 天) that has transcendent meaning. The pervasive idea that Chinese people have with respect to tian is that it is inseparable from the world" (Tang 1991, p. 241).

In a word, after *Juedi Tiantong*, the connotation of *Tian* changed greatly. In ancient times, there was no supreme god, and the unity of heaven and man meant the consistency between the gods and the human world with the help of shamans. But after *Juedi Tiantong*, *Tian* became a silent supreme god and gradually referred to metaphysical principles, and the unity of heaven and man refers to the continuity between human nature and *Tiandao* 天道.

3. The Change in the Communication Mode between *Tian* and Man

If the character *jue* 絕 can be understood as a verb meaning to monopolize or to cut off, then before the completion of *jue*, there existed a period allowing the communication

between *Tian* and man; and, after *jue*, a new pattern was formed, in which man could not communicate with *Tian* at will. As a revolution in conceptual history, in addition to the change in the meaning of *Tian* mentioned above, *Juedi Tiantong* also indicated two different communication modes between *Tian* and man. Before *jue*, man frequently established a link with the gods through religious ceremonies and man was submitted to the gods. While after *jue*, the connection between *Tian* and man was mainly emphasized by Chinese ethical philosophy, where humans focused on the self-awareness of their own subjectivity. The former was the religious and mythical form of communication between *Tian* and man, which can be called *Tong* 通. The latter was the humanistic and rational form of communication, which should be called *He* 合. In this part, the two different communication modes between *Tian* and man will be analyzed, in order to shed light on how *Juedi Tiantong* facilitated the transformation from Chinese shamanism to Confucianism.

3.1. Tong 通*: The Religious and Mythical Form of Communication between Tian and Man*

China's ancient religion was a typical form of shamanism, in which shamans were the mediators between gods and man. This period basically corresponds to the stage before *Juedi Tiantong*, when gods and man were mixed (*minshen zarou* 民神雜糅) and everyone could become a shaman and historian (*Jiawei Wushi* 家為巫史). At this time, human agricultural activities were still greatly influenced by natural conditions, and human beings were subjugated to the will of natural gods. People believed that they could receive instructions from the gods through religious practices, and the connotation of *Tong* 通 provided the exact evidence of this.

In modern semantics, *Tong* 通 means to get from one place to another without obstacles. *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 also said that *Tong* means "to reach". However, in ancient times, the context of using *Tong* 通 was closely linked to religious rituals. Originally, *Tong* was one of the important alternatives to *Sheng* 聖 (sacredness), which was initially synonymous with *Ting* 聽 (hear) and was also cognate with *Sheng* 聲 (voice). Guo Moruo 郭沫若 explained that in ancient times, the character of *Ting*, *Sheng*, *Sheng* 聽聲聖 were actually the same. *Ting* 聽 consisted of a mouth and ear. The mouth means that there is something to say and the ear means listening. What people intended to listen to was the instructions from the gods and people skilled in listening to the gods' instructions were called *Sheng* 聖 (Guo 2002, p. 489). Zhu Junsheng 朱駿聲 said that the so-called *Shengren* 聖人 (sages), before the Spring and Autumn period, were also known as *Tongren* 通人 (shamans). After the Warring States period, *Shengren* 聖人 (saints) specifically referred to the people with perfect moral virtues (Zhu 1983, p. 872). Li Xiaoding 李孝定 also claimed that *Sheng* 聖 originally referred to a person who had good auditory perceptions and *Tong* 通 was a derivate of *Sheng* 聖 (X. Li 1965, p. 3519). Therefore, we can deduce that *Tong* 通 was related to mental activities and implied a complex spiritual experience that occurred during religious rituals. In this case, in addition to meaning physically unobstructed roads, *Tong* 通 also meant the path by which humans could have access to the gods. Zhao Jiang 趙江 concluded that *Tong* 通 can be understood in regard to three dimensions: (1) the communication and connection between *Tian* and man; (2) the communication between political leaders and civilians; and (3) to be purely skilled or proficient in a certain skill (J. Zhao 2023, p. 99–102).

The original meaning of *Tong* 通 shows that, according to the perception of the ancients, the communication between man and the gods could be real. Shamans were able to meet or talk to the gods through rituals or sacrifices and even invite the gods to descend to the human world. In this period, the communication between man and *Tian* was usually analyzed within the field of religion. *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* records some specific communication methods. Previously, some scholars believed that, with the inclusion of ridiculous and absurd words, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* was a collection of mythological stories. Furthermore, it was difficult to certify the historical authenticity of the events recorded in the book. However, it is undeniable that the creation of myths can hardly be groundless. In fact, how ancient people recognized the world is just hidden within these so-called illogical words. The connection between *Tian* and man may not be a

real historical experience, but it can be a real conceptual form of existence. The ancient people's understanding of *Tian*, namely the spirits, ghosts and gods presented in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* was the most primitive explanation of the situation of human beings in the universe, at a time when ancient people could not think rationally and get rid of the effect of religion. *The Classic of the Great Wilderness*: *The Western* (Volume 16 of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*) 山海經·大荒西經 states that:

> Inside the Great Wilderness there is a mountain called *Mount of the Sun and the Moon* 日月山 which is the pivot of the sky. *Wujuntianmen* 吳姖天門 is where the sun and the moon set. There is a god who has a human face and no arms. With two feet bent reversely onto his head, he is called Xu 噓. King Zhuanxu gave birth to Laotong 老童. Laotong gave birth to Chong and Li. The God of Heaven ordered Chong to hold up the sky and Li to press down the earth. After finishing his job, Li gave birth to Ye 噎. Then Li lives at the West Pole, presiding over the movement of the sun, the moon and the stars (translated byWang and Zhao 2010, p. 295).

The text describes a creation myth. Just as Liu Zongdi 劉宗迪 said, heaven was mingled with the earth originally. It was the two brothers, Chong and Li, who worked together in the effort to lift up and press down, which made the heaven and the earth separate from each other (Z. Liu 2020, pp. 64–71). Therefore, Chong, Li and Ye were the gods of creation, who established the order of space and time. Yang Kuan 楊寬 also believed that *Juedi Tiantong* was the myth of creation, which was passed down from the Western Zhou dynasty to the Warring States period (K. Yang 1999, p. 832). From the perspective of modern physical science, the reason for the formation of the universe was certainly not due to the intervention of human or divine power, but *Juedi Tiantong* reflects the ancients' understanding of the relationship between heaven, earth, gods and human beings. Ancient people believed that heaven and earth were close to each other, and it was not difficult for people to ascend to heaven or for gods to descend to earth. In ancient times, when humans were incapable of thinking logically and rationally, they tended to believe that there was a great correlation between human activities and the gods of nature. At this time, the relationship between *Tian* and man was a primitive unity of man and nature, and human beings were not able to establish self-awareness.

The "pivot of the sky" in this text shows us a more concrete way of communicating between heaven and man. The pivot of the sky represents the gate of heaven, through which humans and gods can meet with each other. Just as Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 claimed that at the very beginning, man could ascend to heaven and the interaction between man and heaven occurred all the time (Gong 1975, p. 13). This is also evidenced in the question by King Zhao of Chu 楚昭王 in *Guoyu Chuyu* that if *Chong* 重 and *Li* 黎 did not make heaven and earth inaccessible, would the people be able to ascend to heaven? The phrase "ascend to heaven" suggests that there was a concrete path between heaven and earth, through which people could indeed climb up to heaven to meet the gods. The meeting location was often famous peaks, such as the *Mount of the Sun and the Moon* 日月山. Through the long-term observation of natural phenomena, ancient people found that the sun, the moon and stars in the sky seemed to rise from certain mountains and also fell down onto them. Therefore, they believed that the gods in heaven could descend to earth and live in these mountains.[3] This was, of course, the most primitive form of imagination, but such imagination made the sun, the moon, the stars and mountains sacred. Most mountains in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* were places of worship.

The Classic of Mountains and Seas also records a large number of mountains, which provided access to heaven, such as *Dengbao Mountain* 登葆山. This shows that ancient people believed that towering mountains were one of the paths for people and gods to communicate with each other. However, after *Juedi Tiantong*, except *Zhuanxu*, *Chong* and some other designated shamans, other people were no longer allowed to have contact with the gods. Xu Xusheng 徐旭生 further pointed out that the specific implementation process of the severance was to close the path to climb, so people could not climb as they pleased

(Xu 2023, pp. 124–25). Liu Zongdi 劉宗迪 also deduced that a complete description of the story of *Juedi Tiantong* should be as follows: the two brothers, *Chong* and *Li*, collaborated with each other to separate the heaven and the earth and left the only access to heaven on *the Mountain of the Sun and the Moon*. Then, the two brothers became the guards of that access (Z. Liu 2020, pp. 64–71).

It can be seen that before *Juedi Tiantong*, our ancestors' perception of the natural world was always entangled with the imagination of the gods. It was only after *Juedi Tiantong* that the boundaries between humans and heaven became clear and distinct. Then, it was possible for human beings to get rid of the interference by the gods and begin to discover the instinctive value of human beings. As Yin Rongfang 尹榮方 said, many nations had myths of creation with a common cultural implication being that the end of the age of chaos was marked by humanity's understanding and realization of time and space and the creation of calendars (Yin 2012, pp. 232–39). When human beings discovered fixed and unchanging natural laws, they gradually got rid of primitive obscurantism. This was what *Juedi Tiantong* depicted in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. People could no longer measure time or communicate with the gods privately, and only the rulers could enact the calendar and establish a unified social order. *Juedi Tiantong* can be regarded as the termination of human–god relations, after which, gods returned to gods and people returned to people.

3.2. He 合: The Humanistic and Rational Form of Communication between Tian and Man

If *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* suggests the most simple and primitive way of communication between heaven and man, then the communication mode described in *Shangshu, Lüxing* and *Guoyu Chuyu* has been changed to *He* 合 between *Tian* and man, which appeared after *Juedi Tiantong*. This can be clearly interpreted from Guanshefu's 觀射父 explanation to King Zhao of Chu, which was recorded in *Guoyu Chuyu*:

> Anciently, men and spirits did not intermingle. At that time there were certain persons who were so perspicacious, single-minded, and reverential that their understanding enabled them to make meaningful collation of what lies above and below, and their insight to illumine what is distant and profound. Therefore the spirits would descend into them. The possessors of such powers were, if men, called xi 覡 (shamans), and, if women, wu 巫 (shanmanesses). It is they who supervised the positions of the spirits at the ceremonies, sacrificed to them, and otherwise handled religious matters. As a consequence, the spheres of the divine and the profane were kept distinct. The spirits send down blessings on the people, and accepted from them their offerings. There were no natural calamities (paraphrased by Bodde 1981, pp. 45–84).

First of all, we need to know that the sentence "anciently, men and spirits did not intermingle" does not concern the most primitive stage of religion. As mentioned above, ancient people believed that there was no clear boundary between man and heaven, and anyone could become a shaman. The institutional construction of the four types of ritual specialists and the five kinds of officials in Guanshefu's 觀射父 statement was based on the highly mature religious and cultural system of the Western Zhou dynasty (D. Yu 2005, p. 12). Ritual specialists did not emerge until the Western Zhou dynasty, when the personality of *Tian* had already declined, and the humanistic rationality hidden within *Tian* gradually became dominant.

Primitive shamans relied on their individual talent to invite the gods to descend to meet them, but the main obligation of ritual specialists, as described by Guanshefu 觀射父, was to make administrative arrangements for sacrifices. Ritual specialists were only professionals who were well versed in the protocols of the sacrificial rituals. The emphasis of Guanshefu's 觀射父 description of ritual specialists was not to manifest the sanctity and mystery of religion, but rather to make shamans disenchanted by emphasizing the extremely high level of morality that ritual specialists had to possess in order to be qualified. The ultimate function of ritual specialists was not to convey the instructions from *Tian* to the people on earth, but to cultivate people's virtue and loyalty and lead all people

to behave morally. In this case, *Tian* was regarded as a symbol of justice and impartiality (Lu 2010, pp. 162–70). At this time, the function of *Tian* as a silent personal god had been narrowed down to monitoring and guiding the behavior of the emperor, rather than giving direct instructions to the people. All this shows that during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, *Tian* moved from the religious field into the field of humanity and rationality. Confucianism, pre-Qin dynasty, did not completely deny the existence of *Tian*, but the focus of *Tian* was on secular affairs and humanity's efforts rather than on divinity. After *Juedi Tiantong*, China's primitive shamanism gradually transformed into a moral and ethical religion. Guanshefu's philosophical and rational answer to the mythological question by King Zhao of Chu was undoubtedly linked to a kind of humanistic guidance to both the king and the people, which ultimately resulted in the attributes of the Chinese *Tian* being completely different from that of Western religions. Yao Zhongqiu 姚中秋 proposes that the relationship between *Tian* 天 (heaven) and *Ren* 人 (man) in China is different from the relationship between personalized gods and human beings in the West. The Chinese people achieved a revolutionary breakthrough in regard to humanization and rationalization, which may be the earliest occurrence of such a breakthrough in all human civilization. Yao further emphasizes the silence and speechlessness of *Tian* after *Juedi Tiantong*. Since *Tian* does not speak, the communication between *Tian* and man no longer relies on a face-to-face meeting (Yao 2022, pp. 59–68). After *Juedi Tiantong*, the sacred character *Tong* 通 evolved into the secular and philosophical character *He* 合 (the conformity between *Xinxing* 心性 and *Dao* 道).

To summarize, in ancient times, the method of communication between *Tian* and man included the most simple form of physical communication, such as meeting on towering mountains. Such a religious mode of communication can be called *Tong* 通. After *Juedi Tiantong*, only the king, due to their political and social privilege, could be the mediator between *Tian* and man, and religious sacrifices to *Tian* could only be carried out by the king and ritual specialists. *Tian* turned into a silent and impersonal supreme god, with moral metaphysical characteristics. The communication between *Tian* 天 and *Ren* 人 no longer occurred through religious sacrifices, but moved into the realm of ethics and morality, namely the compatibility between *Xinxing* 心性 (human nature) and *Tiandao* 天道 (the principles of nature). What philosophers during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period were concerned with was the ultimate justification for human civilization, and whether the casting of human nature was in conformity with *Tiandao* 天道. At this time, *Tian* 天metaphorically referred to the rationality generally existing in everything, and it concerned the ideological existence about the commonality and rationality of all things (Lu 1998, p. 1).

4. *Juedi Tiantong* and the Abstraction of Nature

As an important religious revolution, *Juedi Tiantong* not only transformed the meaning of *Tian* and the way in which *Tian* and man communicated with each other, but also influenced man's understanding of nature, which was mainly reflected in China's ancient astrology and the reform of the calendar. In a contemporary context, the word nature generally refers to objects in nature, such as the sky, stars, earth, mountains and rivers. However, in Chinese philosophy, *Ziran* 自然 (nature) does not mean the natural world, and *Tian*, as one of the most important concepts in Chinese philosophy, is usually a metaphysical concept. *Juedi Tiantong* abstracted the term *Tian*, which originally meant concrete and physical natural objects, into a metaphysical concept.

4.1. Juedi Tiantong and the Revolution of the Calendar

In ancient China, the enactment of the calendar depended on the observation of natural phenomena; therefore, changes in the calendar largely reflected the ancient people's understanding of the natural world. In ancient times in China, astronomy, astrology, the calendar and religious rituals were closely related to politics, so *Juedi Tiantong* was not only a revolution in religion, but also an important revolution in regard to astronomy and the

calendar (Wu 2023, pp. 1–8). According to Yin Rongfang 尹榮方, the *Mount of the Sun and the Moon* was actually the astronomical observatory in ancient times, and Chong and Li were the two divine beings living in the pivot of the sky, responsible for connecting *Tian* and man (Yin 2012, p. 229). Their duty was to observe the sun, moon and stars and to formulate the calendar according to the seasonal changes, in order to guide agricultural production, which was called *Guanxiang Shoushi* 觀象授時. In fact, during the Han dynasty, explaining *Juedi Tiantong* from an astronomical perspective was beyond doubt. For example, *Shiji, Lishu* 史記·曆書 (*Records of the Historian, The Book of Calendar*) recorded that Huangdi 黃帝, Zhuanxu and the families of Chong and Li were all specialists in astronomy and made outstanding contributions to formulating the calendar. What *Juedi Tiantong* expressed was that Chong and Li mastered a more accurate method of stargazing and monopolized the interpretation of God's will by formulating a premier calendar that made agriculture more efficient. Consequently, the general public could no longer privately determine the calendar or sacrifice themselves to *Tian*.

It is especially important to note that in ancient China, the observation of the stars and the measurement of time were not a purely scientific form of study. The ancient people's exploration of nature was always linked to the belief in *Tian* and the worship of the gods. In ancient China, science and religion were intermingled. The observation and recording of stars were scientific and rational, but the explanation of the principles of movement was religion-based. It was difficult for Chinese ancients to interpret the changes in nature without the help of the gods. According to Liu Zongdi 劉宗迪, the starry sky was regarded as the origin of divinity, the dwelling pale of the gods and the source of the Mandate of Heaven. Therefore, for the ancients, astronomy was not only a kind of scientific knowledge, but also the manifestation of *Tian* and divinity (Z. Liu 2020, pp. 64–71). It is only in the field of religion and astronomy that we can understand that the ancient people's awe and worship of the natural world may have come from the sense of grandeur and vastness that they experienced when they looked up at the stars at night.

The best archaeological proof of this is the site of the *Tao Temple* 陶寺 in Xiangfen, Shanxi 山西襄汾, a large complex used for measuring time and performing rituals.[4] It proved that the measurement of time was the most direct way for ancient people to communicate with the gods, and observing the starry sky was the only way to understand the deity (Z. Liu 2016, pp. 1–9). It is not difficult to see that humanity and astronomy, science and religion, and rationality and divinity were inseparable in ancient people's view of nature. In this regard, it was difficult for ancient Chinese philosophers to formulate natural philosophy centered on "logos" like ancient Greek philosophers. It is also difficult for Chinese philosophers to recognize *Tian* as nature.

4.2. The Abstraction of Nature

Chinese philosophy advocates *Tianren Heyi* 天人合一 (the unity of heaven and man). However, *Tian* 天 (heaven) is not the equivalent of *Ziran* 自然 (nature). In other words, the concept of *Ziran* 自然 (nature), broadly used in Chinese philosophy, is fundamentally different from the term "nature" in Western ecological philosophy. As Zhang Rulun 張汝倫 said, due to the influence of modern Western civilization, people gradually re-understand the relationship between *Tian* and man according to modern Western realism. *Tian* is understood as "physical nature", and man is understood as "subjectivity". The consequence of such a misunderstanding is the deviation from the tradition of Chinese philosophy (R. Zhang 2019, pp. 52–58). Zhang's assertion is basically correct; however, the problem is why *Tian* 天 (heaven) in Chinese philosophy cannot be understood as physical nature?

In response to this question, *Juedi Tiantong* reminds us of an important clue: that the ancient Chinese people's observation and cognition of natural phenomena have always been associated with religion. Before *Juedi Tiantong*, our ancient ancestors believed that the gods and man were intermingled. Human beings could not completely distinguish themselves from nature. The totemic belief found in many ancient nations is an example, and the boundary between man and heaven was not clear. After *Juedi Tiantong*, *Tian* moved

from the field of religion into the realm of humanism and ethics. However, "nature", originally contained in *Tian*, did not become an independent object to be understood and studied. Furthermore, after the breakthrough of philosophy during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, *Tian* became an abstract concept referring to the principle that universally exists in all things. *Tao Te Ching* 道德經 (part 1) said that "Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Dao. The law of the Dao is its being what it is" (translated by Legge 2021, p. 17) 人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然. Originally, *Tian* was regarded as the supremacy in the world, but Daoism added Dao on the top of *Tian*. In addition, Daoism established an abstract general principle, Tao, which relates to allowing everything to be themselves. In this case, *Ziran* 自然 (nature) is the abstract law of *Tian*, which keeps the universe moving, and no longer refers to the physical natural world. Confucianism also focuses on the moral attributes of *Tian*, emphasizing the capability of man to be in harmony with *Tian* in terms of moral virtue, rather than the harmonious coexistence between man and ecological nature. Just as *Zhouyi Qiangua* 周易·乾卦 said, a great man has virtue vast as heaven and earth and wisdom as brilliant as the sun and the moon. He works in pursuit of the good order as the alteration of the seasons and reveals good fortune and disaster in his miraculous divination as ghosts and spirits do 夫大人者，與天地合其德，与日月合其明，與四時合其序.

5. Conclusions

To summarize, *Juedi Tiantong*, an important religious revolution in ancient China, not only shaped the metaphysical conception of *Tian* in Chinese philosophy, but also laid down the main mode of communication between *Tian* and man, which was the religious foundation of the unity of heaven and man. Karl Jaspers said that despite being likewise bound, man brings forth his environment in a boundless overpassing of his ties. Life in an environment that he has created himself, simultaneously with life in the natural environment, is the hallmark of humanity (Jaspers 1965, p. 101). The formation of civilization depends on a certain natural environment, but the environment is not the only decisive factor. In fact, we find that religion also affects the relationship between human beings and the natural environment in reverse. Just as Pan Zhichang 潘知常 said, as the dominate and leading value in the axial era, religion undoubtedly had a historical rationality, because religion represented the first supernatural and fundamental value constructed by human beings, and also represented the initial self-awareness of humanity. Life was no longer natural and finite, but spiritual and infinite (Pan 2023, pp. 73–83). The significance of religion lies in the transcendence of nature. In this respect, the differences between Chinese and Western civilizations in the axial age were not only due to the various geographic conditions, but also due to the diverse religious cultures. In fact, the inward path of transcendence[5] in Chinese philosophy formed in the axial age actually originated from religious culture, especially the transcendent tradition formed by *Juedi Tiantong*. The severance between *Tian* and man after *Juedi Tiantong* shaped the metaphysical dimension of *Tian* and laid the foundation for the later Confucianism to pursue the intrinsic continuity and inseparability of human nature and the cosmic order (天道 *Tiandao*), and formed the unity of heaven and man with the core value of spiritual cultivation. Although the unity of heaven and man can hardly be understood as a simple harmonious coexistence between man and nature, this value orientation implies people's awe and respect for nature, and should be highly emphasized in modern times.

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Notes

1 For example, Zhang Dainian 張岱年 believed that *Tian* has three meanings: the supreme master, nature and the most basic principle. Mou Zhongjian 牟鐘鑒 also believed that *Tian* has three meanings: the primordial existence, the natural existence and the transcendent existence. Ren Jiyu 任繼愈 proposed that there are five meanings of *Tian*: *Tian* of master, *Tian* of destiny, *Tian* of rationality, *Tian* of personality and *Tian* of nature.

2 According to Heidegger, philosophy is metaphysics. Metaphysics relates to being as a whole: the world, man, God with respect to being, with respect to the belonging together of beings in being. Metaphysics views beings as being in the manner of representational thinking which provides reasons. For since the beginning of philosophy and with that beginning, the being of beings has shown itself to be the ground (arche, aition). The ground is from where beings as such are what they are in regard to their becoming, perishing and persisting, as something that can be known, handled and worked upon. As the ground, being brings beings to their actual presence. The ground shows itself as a presence. (Heidegger 1972, pp. 55–56) Similarly, this final ground expressed in Chinese philosophy is the concept of *Tiandi* 天帝—*Tiandao* 天道—*Xinxing* 心性, which was established during the transformation of the axial period.

3 In *The Classic of the Mountains and the Seas*, a number of mountains in the human world are regarded as the places where gods dwell 帝之下都. For example, according to *The Classic of Western Mountains*: 400 li to the southwest is a mountain called Kunlun. This is god's dwelling place in the human world. *Luwu*, a god who has a tiger's body, nine tails, a human face and a tiger's paws, presides over this mountain. He is also in charge of the Nine Parts of the Sky and the God of Tian's Zoo for the Seasons.

4 There are a large number of articles about the important influence of the Tao Temple 陶寺 on China's ancient astronomy and calendar, such as Wang, Zhenzhong 王震中 2015 (Z. Wang 2015). *Tao Temple and Yao City—the Paradigm of China's Early States* 陶寺與堯都—中國早期國家的典型. *Southern Cultural Relic* 南方文物 3: 83–98.

5 Confucianism emphasizes the unity of human nature 人性 and *Tiandao* 天道. Confucius put forward the thought of "benevolence" 仁, which, to some extent, focuses on the subjectivity of morality and spirit. People have the ability to cultivate their inner morality, to achieve inner moral perfection, which is called "benevolence". In a word, the moral root of society is human subjectivity. Schwartz called such an inner turn to ethics the "inward transcendence" that brings a subjective focus to moral and spiritual life (Benjamin I. Schwartz 1975. Transcendence in ancient China. *Daedalus* 104: 57–68).

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Article

Chinese Chan Buddhism and the Agrarian Aesthetic in the Garden

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Abstract: As the most important Buddhist school in the history of Chinese Buddhism, the philosophy of Chan Buddhism and its agricultural Chan practice have had a profound influence on the lives of the literati and scholars. Both historically and logically, the term "Chan Dharma 禪法" is extremely rich in connotations. The so-called "agricultural Chan 農禪" is a transformation of Chinese farming culture into the "Chan practice" by practising meditation through farming activities. The "garden farming 園耕" refers to the farming activities of the literati and scholars in the gardens, which were driven by the style of agricultural Chan. Under the influence of agricultural Chan, "garden farming" took on a new spiritual attitude towards crops and created a natural aesthetic realm of life in the act of farming. This article consists of three main sections. I start with an introduction to the religious thoughts and practices of Chan Buddhism, pointing out that the underlying colour of Chan Buddhism is the aesthetics of life, while gradually evoking its special practice of Chan. The second section discusses the concept of agricultural Chan and farming activities in gardens, to figure out the characteristics of agricultural Chan and how farming activities in gardens are carried out. In the third section, I argue for the beauty of farming in gardens, pointing out the essence of the beauty in garden farming and what aesthetic possibilities the act of farming in gardens may embody.

Keywords: agricultural Chan; farming practice; nature; aesthetics

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1. The Religious Thought and Practice of Chinese Chan Buddhism

The doctrinal and sectarian development of Chinese Chan Buddhism has a long history, and the practice of Chan is not only spread within Chan School, but is also widespread in the lives of Buddhist monastics, believers and lay people in general, resulting in deep and multifaceted connotations of the term 'Chan Dharma 禪法'. It also involves a great deal of 'farming' vocabulary associated with the practice of Chan. In the following, I will first introduce the general idea in the religious thoughts of Chan Buddhism, then I will discuss the practice in Chan Buddhism to figure out the dynamic construction within Chan and dharma. Both the religious thought and practice in Chan Buddhism lead to the understanding of agricultural Chan as many farming vocabularies are associated with Chan practices.

1.1. Religious Thought in Chinese Chan Buddhism

Chinses Chan Buddhism is the most important Buddhist school in the history of Chinese Buddhism. Among the various schools of Chinese Buddhism, Chinses Chan Buddhism was not only an early and long-established school, with many branches and a high degree of domestication, but it also had a far-reaching influence on the thinking patterns and lifestyles of the literati class, as well as on the spiritual tastes, aesthetic trends and historical atmosphere of the time.

First of all, the harmony 圓融 is the cornerstone of Chan thoughts. A sense of harmony is prevalent in all Buddhist schools in the Sui and Tang dynasties, and this is also the case in Chan School. Chan Buddhism's harmony is the process of integrating the doctrines and practices of Buddhism into its own growth by taking in the history of Buddhist

development with the Chan approach. Although Chan appears to be "a separate transmission outside the teachings 教外別傳" referred to as "different religion 別教", it is in fact also called "yuanjiao 圓教"—a religion of integration and harmony. It is an indisputable fact that the first patriarch of Chan in China, Bodhidharma combined the Mahayana and the Hinayana view of Chan and laid the cultural tone of Chinese Buddhism from the small to the great with a rounded attitude.

Secondly, the integration of Buddhism into life through practice is the pillar of Chan thoughts. It is noteworthy that the Fourth Patriarch Daoxin 道信 "suspended" the Chan School's wandering and secluded life with no fixed place and trace of action, and in 625AD, he began to "ensconce 安居" and opened an altar for Chan sermon at Zhengjue Temple in Huangmei Mountain. This "settlement" rapidly expanded the Chan monastic institutions and regulations, which was conducive to the convergence and growth of the monastic community. At the same time, Daoxin 道信 advocated a "monastic farming" approach that the monks cultivated the land, directly participating in farming practices to establish and maintain economic autonomy and independence from outsiders" (Ronald S. Green 2013). This self-sufficiency in farming not only exempted monks from laypersons' donations to maintain livelihood which their Indian Buddhist counterparts mainly rely on, but also form an independent tradition detached from government administrative and legal interventions. That "when Chinese Buddhism was persecuted by the government during the Tang Dynasty in 842, Chan Buddhism was able to survive more easily than doctrinal Buddhist traditions because it was more economically autonomous from the government than those other traditions" (Ronald S. Green 2013). As a result, Chan Buddhism eventually became a long-lasting and self-sufficient Buddhist school and farming emerged as a prominent approach to everyday life practices.

Thirdly, the Chan Buddhism's philosophy of life is based on the dimension of the 'mind'. The mind is both the ontology of philosophy and the subject of life, and is equivalent to the Buddha in faith. This equivalence means that it does not establish words as a way to reveal the essence of the Tathāgata-garbha. As it is recorded in the Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch that "Good friends, not being deluded about one's own mind is called 'self-realization'; self-realization is called 'seeing one's nature'; seeing one's nature is called 'becoming a Buddha'" (Yampolsky 1967, p. 150). The idea of "mind as Buddha 即心即佛" means that the infinite Buddha wisdom is inherent in every person's mind and can be realized in life. This could be traced back to the Five Patriarchs 五祖, Hong Ren 弘忍, opened the "Eastern Mountain Dharma Gate 東山法門", and many of his disciples were divided into two sects, the Northern and Southern, with Huineng's 慧能 Southern Sect being particularly influential. After that, there are Huairang 懷讓 in Nanyue, Xingsi 行思 in Qingyuan, Shenhui 神會 in Heze, Huizhong 慧忠 in Nanyang and Xuanjue 玄覺 in Yongjia who transmitted the lamp 傳燈接法 (the transmission of the dharma from master to disciple). This genealogical continuity also reflected the relations between the mind and Buddha. Southern Buddhism has always advocated no mind, nonattachment, no dwelling, and "mind as Buddha 即心即佛", but this "mind" is not an abstract theoretical presupposition, but a daily life of walking in the moment, stopping in the moment. With the maturation and crystalization of Chan movements over time, it emphasized "the the role of the Buddha-nature, or pure mind, within, as well as the behavior of the illusions—the false thoughts, or impure mind—that obscure the appreciation of our inner purity"(McRae 2004, p. 17). The so-called 'mind' is the 'ordinary mind' of 'living in the moment', where the mind is in things, not outside things, let alone outside the world.

Fourthly, the philosophy of life in Chan Buddhism is also called life aesthetics. That "Chan advocates an instantaneous, all-encompassing enlightenment that happens in the context of the everyday realm and retains a direct connection with life itself. It is in the ordinary perceptual existence of everyday life that one can find transcendence and enlightenment, and that one can attain the indestructible Buddha-nature" (Li 2017, pp. 161–62). This could be manifested in the history of Chinese Buddhism. It is known that three events in the history of Chinese Buddhism set the tone for the historical development of Chi-

nese Chan Buddhism: "dual cultivation of Chan and Pure Land 禪淨雙修", "Zhuang-Chan merging 莊禪合流", and "monastic farming approach 農禪並舉". After the Northern Song Dynasty, most of the Buddhist schools died out and only schools of Chan and Pure Land remained, which gradually merged, and Chan was similar to Lao-Zhuang Daoism in that it advocated practising agriculture, all of which made Chinese Chan Buddhism a "secular" sense. "By the time of Mazu (709–788), the agricultural Chan had become a prominent meditation practices of Chan monasticism as a result of the reform on thoughts, doctrinal teachings, ritual observances and spiritual practices of Chan. Under these circumstances, the agricultural Chan was established by Mazu's disciple, the Chan master Baizhang Huaihai (749–814), in the form of qinggui (monastic rules and procedures)" (Huan Qiu 2013, p. 33). It can be inferred from this institutional arena that Chan Buddhism's focus on farming practices is in fact a philosophy in life with its roots in living in the present world. It neither encourages nor rejects secular desire, it defuses it; it does not exaggerate the distance and gulf between the ideal and reality, but instead merges the ideal and reality into one, realising the individual ideal in the vast and boundless life. Such a philosophy and aesthetic is fully embodied in the practices of Agricultural Chan.

1.2. Spiritual Practices of Chan Buddhism

"Xiuxing 修行" means to practice—to implement faith, to integrate faith into life and even to rewrite the process and results of life. Some terms in Buddhism, such as the Three Vehicles of Learning 三學, Four Noble Truth 四諦, Eightfold Path 八正道, Four Meditation Heavens (Caturdhyanabhumi) 四禪天, Four Foundations of Mindfulness 四念處, and even Eight Hundred Thousand Dharma Door 八万法門, are all related to Buddhist practices. There are many ways to improve the efficiency and quality of practices, such as the popular "Sutra of Practice" written by the Indian monks Luocha 罗刹 and translated by Zhu Fahu 竺法護 in the Western Jin Dynasty. As early as the primitive Buddhist period, the "One Practice 一修法" was one of the "ten superior methods 十裏法" mentioned by Shakyamuni in Volume 9 of the Chang ahan jing (Dirghagama-sutra) 長阿含經.

In a narrower sense, "Chan Dharma" is the specific practice of Chan Buddhism. The Dharmadhara Sutra 達摩多羅禪經 (in two volumes), translated by Buddhabhadra in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, is an early text on Chan practices, progressively opening the door to the "Chan Dharma". The summaries are more comprehensive and precise in Chixiu Baizhang qinggui (Imperial Edition of the Baizhang Rules of Purity 敕修百丈清規, the Jingde chuandeng lu (Record of the transmission of the lamp 景德傳燈錄 and the Chan Lin Xiang Qi Jian 禪林象器箋. Sitting cross-legged, without mode of mind, and the whole being becomes one with the universe is called sitting meditation, which is an Indian Buddhist method of inner introspection, practiced by both Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism. Chan Buddhism went on to amplify this approach. After the eastern journey of Kumarajiva, he equated Chan with samādhi 三昧 (sanmei; meditation), advocated the rituals, regulations, and practices of sitting meditation, and forged a colorful culture of Chan Buddhism. For example, according to Volume 5 of the Chixiu Baizhang qinggui (Imperial Edition of the Baizhang Rules of Purity 敕修百丈清規, sitting in meditation requires resting the mind and even abstaining from food, sitting cross-legged or half-legged, with the left palm on the right palm, the tongue against the palate, the eyes slightly open, leaving all conceptual thinking behind and continuous contemplation. There are also various Chan items like "zuotang 坐堂, zuocan 坐參", "qingchan 請禪", "peichan 陪禪". In addition, there are even "sitting meditation boards" in front of the dormitories to announce the time of sitting meditation.

In a broader sense, it does not end there. The term "Chan Dharma" has broader intellectual lore, value connotations, and concomitant effects. This term can be perceived in two ways: one is "Chan 禪" and the other is "Dharma 法". On the one hand, 'Chan' is a multifaceted concept. From the perspective of cultural transmission, "Chan" comes from Indian "Dhyāna" and is a method of practice, a way for individuals to practise the Dharma through meditation and contemplation—both the physical form of "meditation"

and the inner thought of "wisdom" which combined the theoretical and practical results of 'meditation 定' and 'wisdom 慧' in the 'Three Vehicles of Learning 三學'. On this basis, after it was introduced to China, Chan became more than just a method of practice and gradually grew into a Buddhist school, and in later times it could even refer to Buddhism in general. However, from the perspective of the local Chinese culture, it had a very precise and specific meaning before the Indian 'Dhyāna' was introduced to China. The term "Chan" in domestic Chinese culture refers to the rituals of the emperor's sacrifice to Heaven and Earth, and specifically refers to the "cession" of the emperor to another in order to achieve successive reigns and the continuity of the state. There is a term called "Chan rang 禪讓" referring to cession in a Taoist moral manner which advocates a modest and natural attitude towards power with wuwei erzhi (to govern without exertion). It can be inferred from a retroactive perspective, that the maturation of Chan is in fact a 'product' of multicultural interactions, especially the product of the dialogue between the Chinese and Indian cultures. It is a Buddhist way of practice as well as a Taoist open-mindedness and an implicit significance of reestablishment among kinship, clans and even power of imperial sovereignty.

On the other hand, the meaning of "dharma" is polysemous. "Dharma" is the catechism, doctrine and canon to which people adhere to the principles and methods of Buddhism (Cozort and Shields 2018). "Dharma" also represents the secular ideal of fairness, justice, rationality and moral self-discipline (Buswell and Lopez 2013). "Dharma" is a multifaceted concept. On the face of it, dharma from India is more akin to a Western 'contract'—a 'contract' between the divine and the people that people believe in the divine and the divine act as the patron saint of people. The life of faith is in accordance with the law of cause and effect, which also supports the cycle of karma. The fact that the Dharma is the most important aspect of Triratna (Buddha-dharma-sangha) also embodies piety for the rationality of cause and effect. On a deeper level, however, from the perspective of the local Chinese culture, "dharma" already had a very precise and specific meaning before it was introduced to China from India. The so-called "Dharma 法" of ancient China before India can be explained from water 水 and the unicorn 鷹 when being explained in semiotic Chinese characters and radicals. The word "unicorn 鷹", refers to a divine beast that is able to distinguish justice from evil, whose horns can punish people who disobey the righteousness of the law. Therefore, "Dharma" is to regulate people and has the meaning of law, decree, standard, etc. It is not only a causal and rational method of behaviour for people to follow, emulate and refer to, but also a principle for judging right and wrong in a concrete value theory.

Throughout history, the manifestation of Chan Dharma has been a major factor in the widespread dissemination and overall transmutation of Chinese Buddhist culture. If the Sinicization of Buddhism was a major historical progress in the history of Chinese Buddhism, then one of the key symbols of Buddhism's domestication was that it brought 'Chan Dharma' to the centre stage of history. At the end of the third century (402), the Sutra of Sitting Meditation Samhita 坐禪三昧經 translated by Kumārajīva (344–413) included the Sutra of Bodhisattva Meditation 菩薩禪法經, the Sutra of Alanruo Practice Meditation 阿蘭若習禪法, and the Essentials of Meditation 禪法要, which mainly introduced various methods of sitting meditation and had an extremely widespread influence. However, when Buddhism was first introduced to China from the West in the early third century, before the establishment of Chan School there was already the role of *chanshi* (practitioner who practices meditation). During this period, *chanshi* were only limited as one of the types of Buddhist clergy who were on a par with the fashi (dharma teacher) 法師 who preached the Dharma and the lvshi (discipline teacher) 律師 who practised discipline. Obviously, Chan did not forge its orthodoxy as a predominant method to disseminate Buddhism at this time. Before the fifth century, although there were no Chan schools, practitioners of Chan meditation were extremely common. In fact, most schools of Chinese Buddhism were established by the Sui and Tang dynasties, and before the fifth century there may have been "liujia qizong 六家七宗", but there were no established schools. In the Sui and

Tang dynasties and thereafter, schools sprang up, each fulfilling its own meditation practices, and the practitioners of Chan were not confined to internal disciples of Chan school. As for the sixth century, when Buddhism flourished in ancient China, not only did Chinese Buddhism establish the most representative and influential Chan School, but there was a prevailing phenomenon that basically most Buddhist schools practise "Chan"—"sitting in meditation 坐禪" was the consensus of all Buddhism schools at that time. There were also Chan teachings outside Chan school. For example, the "Zuochan fayao (Manual for sitting meditation) 坐禪法要" elaborated by Master Zhizhe of Tiantai for his lay brother is also a summary of the Mohe Zhiguan 摩訶止觀- Master Zhizhe (538–597) established ten special sections to expound the principles of sitting meditation, respectively are juyuan 具緣, heyu 呵欲, qigai 棄蓋, tiaohe 調和, fangbian 方便, zhengxiu 正修, shanfa 善發, juemo 覺魔, zhibing 治病, zhengguo 證果. When it comes to the Tang Dynasty, Zong Mi 宗密 (780–841) combined Chan with Huayan and created "Huayan Chan 華嚴禪". Zong Mi divided Chan into five categories: waidao Chan(exoteric Chan), fanfu Chan(lay Chan), Hinayana Chan, Mahayana Chan, and the supreme Chan as taught by Bodhidharma. He proposed that the highest manifestation of Huayan Chan should be the combination of Huayan Buddhism 華嚴宗 and Heze Chan 菏澤禪, and even the integration of doctrines and Chan teachings as one. Then the Chan Buddhism transformed from a separate transmission of outside teachings to a form of unity with doctrines and Chan teachings. What is even more worth emphasising is that the 'Chan Dharma' quickly became popular outside the walls of monasteries with literati and scholars vying to emulate it. With or without Buddhist beliefs, the practice of Chan became a popular daily practice for literati and scholars to cultivate a lifestyle of leisure and elegance.

Logically, the promotion of the Chan Dharma is also an important theoretical support for the implementation of Buddhist doctrine in general. The inner thread of the sinicization of Buddhism is the shift from Prajna to Nirvana Buddhata, from Buddhist negation theory to affirmation theory, and the fleshing out of ontological thinking about the world into self-meditation. Chinese Chan Buddhism with its basic attitude of harmony and integration as a universal way of practice is the fundamental dharma door of the implementation of Buddhism's teachings. For example, in the *Buddha's Commentary on the Immeasurable Life Sutra* 佛說觀無量壽經疏妙宗鈔會本, it is stated that "Scholars should know that since daily contemplation, all sanguan 三觀 (Emptiness, Prajnapti, Madhyamika) are used for Chan practices which required thinking to make the manifestation of the image. If you complete meditation like this, the confusion of the three realms(realms of sensuous desire, form and formless) of thinking will be subdued" (Zhizhe 2002, p. 164). Here, "thinking becomes the emergence of the image" is very crucial. According to the teachings of the Tiantai School, in the practices of the Pure Land School, it is only through the wonderful observation of images that it is possible to attain the seventh faith position, and only when one reaches this position can one view the Buddha's "true Dharma body". In other words, the significance of Chan practices as a meditation approach is far more universal than Chan as a school.

The Chan Dharma spread broadly and is boundless and unlimited. As a method of practice, the main paradigm of thinking in Chan practices lies in the fact that it offers a non-objectification mode of thinking. In Huihai's *Treatise on the Essentials of Enlightenment* 頓悟入道要門論, it is said that: "The question: What is seeing the true body of the Buddha? Answer: To see the Buddha's true body without seeing what is there is to see the Buddha's true body... It is like a bright mirror; if one looks at the image of an object, the image appears; if one does not look at the image, the image is not seen." (Huihai 1968, p. 42). Objectification pursues a one-to-one, one-way relationship between subject and object, while non-objectification is a transcendence of objectification, constituting a field in which subject and object are juxtaposed into the present and eliminated the fixed identity of subject and object. It is similar to the phenomenological process of intentional generation which aims to forge a domain of presentness. In this domain, the so-called Being 有 is an object, and non-being 無 is also an object. They merge and integrate as a unitary whole without falling into dualistic extremes.

On this basis, the spiritual connotation of Chan Dharma more importantly lies in its role as a realm of life which gives the values of the other shore to the secular this shore. If the concentration of the Pure Land is about rendering the magnificence of the other shore and the firm belief in the salvation of all sentient beings, the focus of Chan Dharma is to discover the value of the secular this shore and the aesthetic sentiment of self-realisation. Chan Dharma does not seek to remove the theoretical presupposition of the other shore, but rather to erase the boundary between this shore and the other shore—compared to making the other shore an imitation of this shore's magnificence and prosperity image, it prefers to create a transcendentalism ideal in secular this shore. To step further, the realization of transcendentalism ideal in this shore is achieved through the practices of the present. Those practices of enlightenment are all realized in the process of daily activities like eating when hungry, sleeping when tired, chopping wood, and carrying water. This emphasis on concrete activities of daily matters forms an effective prelude to the elaboration of the meaning of farming.

1.3. The "Farming" Vocabulary Associated with Chan Practices

Even without the specific terminology of "agricultural Chan", in Chinese Buddhism, and particularly in Chan Buddhism, there is a ubiquitous use of terms that are close to the culture of 'farming'.

Firstly, there are terms relating to the process of plant growth, for example, "zhongzi 種子 (seed), *yishu* 異熟 (ripening), *yinghua* 英華 (blossom), *guoshi* 果實 (fruit), etc. That a "zhongzi 種子 (seed)" is buried in the soil, takes root, sprouts, "blooming", "ripening" and "bears fruit", as originally developed by the ancients as they observed the growth of crops, eventually became a fundamental theoretical category in Buddhism. In Chan Buddhism, the cultivation of Buddha-nature in the human body is metaphorically described in terms of the growth of the "seed"—the plant tuber—which is Buddha-nature. The essence of a "zhongzi 種子 (seed)" is that it has the ability to grow, to take root and sprout, to break through the surface of the earth, to absorb the essence and nutrients of heaven and earth, to blossom, to ripen and to bear. It is worth noting that the 'ripening' here has a specific indication of plant growth. The so-called "Huayan 華嚴" is also known as "Huayan 花嚴", in which "hua" means "flower" and "yan" means "solemnity".

Secondly, there are Chan terms "infinitesimal particle" related to farming tools "a hoe 阿耨" which is mentioned in the *Essential Art of Qi Min*, "Ch.1, Ploughing Fields" 齊民要術·耕田第一, that: "The way to raise seedlings is better to hoe (耨 nou) than to shovel (鉏 ju), and to sweep (划 hua) than to hoe (耨 nou), with a handle three inches long and a blade two inches wide, to paddle the ground and weed" (Siwei Jia 2011, p. 21). "Hoe (耨 nou)" is a tool for weeding. The word "hoe (耨 nou)" is constitued of the chinese radical "plough (耒lei)", which is an agricultural tool used to turn the soil, and "chen (辰)" refers to the shell which can also be used for ploughing. And the radical "cun (寸)" means manual operation. The use of "hoe" in the translation is clearly a "mirror image" of ancient Chinese farming culture.

Thirdly, there are terms related to farmland—for example, 'tian 田 (farmland)', 'jin 井 (wells)', 'yi 邑 (city)', 'ye 野 (heath)', etc. As the proverb goes, "All who admire Buddhism respect the field of blessings 欽崇釋教，俱敬福田", and it is in terms of the "field of blessings (福田)" that Buddhism creates and promotes the world on the other side. The term "field of blessings 福田" is similar to "blessed well 福井", and there is also another saying "body field 身田". The word "yi 邑" is similar to "capital 都", but is older than "capital 都" and is often referred to in the scriptures as "jing-yi 京邑" or "luo-yi 洛邑". Also, 'ye 野 (wildness)' is the opposite of 'chao 朝 (court)'. All these terms relating to farmland are connected to the Chan vocabularies.

From a practical point of view, monks are also associated with gardens. A noteworthy detail is that those gardens which were left unattended were mostly taken over by monks. In Liang Zhangju 梁章鉅's *Inscription of Canglang Pavilion* 滄浪亭圖題詠跋 in the Qing dynasty, it is recorded that: "The garden was guarded by monks, and monks have

a field, which can be used for decades, and it is hoped that those who board the pavilion afterwards will have it forever" (Liang 2008, p. 12). Monks have always had the status of 'legal representatives' who maintained the daily operation of the garden buildings. This is due to the fact that monks are chujia ren 出家人 who are detached from their secular life and family bonds, so objectively they are isolated from the interests of the family community entanglements which in turn effectively prevented disputes over property rights. The former owner of the garden is the "high standard" of the garden with delicate design and symbolization of virtue and tastes, while the monk is the "bottom line" of the garden with the monk's role as a garden keeper, leading a simple monastic life. Monks not only operated within the monastery, but also in gardens that were abandoned by their original owners, transforming these into a kind of 'public facility' where monks practise and fulfil their promise to protect all living beings.

With a mythologizing sleight of hand, monks are often 'woven' into stories and myths of 'origins' of various skills including gardening. For example, there is a story in the *Record of Yangxian Pottery*, "Jiasu" 陽羨名陶錄· 家溯 that "There is a monk in Jinsha Temple who has been famous for a long time. It is said that this monk has an introverted personality and is used to being accompanied by pots and jars. The steps for the monks to make a clap pot are to select fine grained soil, pinch it, make it a round shape, hollow the center, decorate it with a hand shank, and finally put it in a burning cave; a clay pot that can be used by people on a daily basis is made out of this" (Q. Wu 2011, pp. 259–60). This sounds more like a Buddhist story with Taoist ethos, and has been disseminated for a long time and cannot be disproved. Another example is that the fragrance of flowers has always been associated with monks. In Wen Zhenheng 文震亨's *Records of Special Things*, "Ruixiang" 長物誌· 瑞香, it is recorded that: "According to legend, there was a bhikkhu in Mount Lu who was sleeping in the daytime and smelled the fragrance of flowers in his dream, so he woke up and searched for them, hence the name of this kind of fragrance is called Sleeping Incense. It is said that this kind of flower symbolizes a propitious omen, so it is also called an auspicious fragrance, another name called Shenang 麝囊" (Wen 2011, p. 443). Here, it discusses daytime sleep, not nighttime sleep, and the bhikkhu who smells the flowers is clearly a daydreamer whose dreaming is consistent with the inner impulse and practical logic of artistic creation.

2. Agricultural Chan and Farming in the Garden

There is a large volume of published studies describing the relations between nature and Chinese Chan Buddhism. When it comes to the connection between Chan (Zen) Buddhism and agricultural practices, the focal attention of studies is more paid to Japanese Zen Buddhism. For example, Swanson discusses the relationship between religion and nature, specifically focusing on the roles of meditation and agricultural practices in Japanese Zen Buddhism, which shares historical and philosophical connections with Chinese Chan Buddhism (Swanson 2011, pp. 683–701). Ronald Green illustrated Chinese Chan Buddhism's direct connections with farming self-sufficiency from a monastic institutional perspective, but this is only a small part to explore Fukuoka Masanobu's identity as a naturalist farmer (Ronald S. Green 2013). There are also studies on the ecological dimensions of various Chinese religions, including Chan Buddhism, and their potential contributions to addressing contemporary environmental issues (Tucker and Berthrong 2014). Considering this, the proposition of "agricultural Chan" in this research is to root the specific aspects of Chinese Chan Buddhism into the process of farming in gardens as a result of the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism. This section is intended to show that "agricultural Chan" as farming activities in the garden is a social product of the combination of "Chan Dharma" and ancient Chinese farming civilisation. At the same time, gardens were not just a luxury for the nobility of the palace to enjoy material possessions, but had their own necessity for cultivation. In fact, the early monastic community was also potentially associated with garden farming.

2.1. What Is "Agricultural Chan"?

The gardens of Suzhou are known for their intricate designs, which often incorporate elements of Agricultural Chan, emphasizing the connection between humans and their natural environment (Liu 2005). The term 'Agricultural Chan' refers to the special meditation practice of the ancient Chinese literati through 'farming', and the dual world of ideological agendas and religious sentiments that emerged from it. The so-called "farming 農" can be divided into two levels, one being the abstract social division of labour in general, which relates to 'agriculture' and 'farmer' in a social sense, and the other being the specific empirical individual behaviour of "farming 農" which associates with personal behavior in response to personal satisfaction.

Ancient Chinese society was an agricultural society, and farming was the cornerstone of the state. The moral principles favor the standpoint of agricultural officials whose aim is to persuade people to participate in farming activities and make the importance of farming a common social consensus. If one were to follow industry and commerce, one would be relegated to the last class of society. As an old proverb is mentioned in the *Essential Art of Qi Min*, "Ch. 26, Goods and Produce" 齊民要術· 貨殖第二十六: "Seeking wealth with a poor man's mind, it is better to be a craftsman than a farmer, to be a businessman than a craftsman, to set up a stall in the market than to embroider. This is claimed that the business is the last resort which is easy to seek profit" (Jia 2011, p. 138). "Seeking wealth with a poor man's mind" implies a rapid elevation, transfer and leap in social status—not seeking wealth with wealth, not being wealthy in the first place, but seeking to change from "poor" to "rich" with an original "poor" status. The consequence of this "change" was that the peasants were inevitably inferior to the workers and merchants. Therefore, this rapid leap in pursuing short-term competitive efficiency out of profit-making considerations belonging to the "last(marginal) industry 末業" and logic of the poor. That "agriculture encouragement 劝农" was the hallmark of ancient outstanding feudal officials. In *Essential Art of Qi Min*, "Epilogue" 齊民要術· 後序, it is mentioned that *shouling* 守令 *is* the official who is close to people and shouling's primary responsibility is to persuade and encourage people to farm. In the Han Dynasty, officials such as Zhaoxinchen and Gong Sui all persuaded people to go farming in the field (Jia 2011, p. 313). There is a long history of "agriculture encouragement" in ancient Chinese society.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to spiritualise an agricultural 'farming' that is institutionally and ideologically subservient to the societal division of labour. This can be manifested in the descriptions of Daoan's 道安 *Two Contemplations* 二教論 that the increase in the amount of farmers due to the agricultural officials. The contents of agricultural life are a constitution of eight aspects, including sowing five kinds of grains, and plant mulberry to ensure sufficiency in clothes and foods. So, it is also called eight policies. Farming can provide food and goods which is what it is good at (Daoxuan 1990, p. 137). That is to say, the only responsibility for the 'peasant family' is farming to provide food, clothes and goods, all associated with living material subsistence, but not with the individual's inner spiritual world or spiritual transcendence. In other words, 'agriculture encouragement 勸農' was mostly a function of showing the bureaucrat's political performances during his reign, and had nothing to do with his personal cultivation of the mind.

As is the case that agricultural Chan exemplified as a paradigmatic approach for monastics' Buddhist practice and enlightenment, it also exerts spiritual influences on the farming practices of the literati class. That agricultural Chan refracted in literati's farming activities called "gonggeng 躬耕 (bending one's back to plow a field)" which able to infuse poetry, personality charisma, life introspections and even rationality in farming activities. This literati style of "gonggeng 躬耕" emphasizes not "plowing" but "bowing", focusing on personal practice that the literati, as individuals, directly face the soil. In the process of contact with natural objects, especially crops, the literati accumulated experience of harvesting, repeatedly "chewed" the inner enlightenment of their spiritual minds or resonated with religious sensibilities. Under most circumstances, such a limited personal behavior of "gonggeng 躬耕" is rare in vast wildness, but remains in gardens of Jiangnan—the literati,

as garden owners, "plowing under the sun and reading when it rains". The experience of reading with "gonggeng 躬耕" accompanying rooted into the heart of the literati is just the same as sowing the seed in the soil.

Logically, the parallelism of agriculture and Chan Buddhism is reflected in the linkage of human beings' dual existence that agriculture points to human physical corporeity while Chan Buddhism points to the human spirit. Without agriculture, where would food come from? Farming is the condition for food; just as without Chan Buddhism, how can the mind be at peace? "Chan" is the practice of the mind. Therefore, "agricultural Chan" is the theoretical assumption, the realistic process and the ultimate result of the unification of the dual human existence. Historically, the value of agricultural Chan manifested in its breakthrough of changing the prejudice that Chan Dharma can only be achieved through silent illumination and creating the meditation experience on a practical level through concrete manual activities. Before the advent of Agricultural Chan, Chan Dharma, as an ancient dharma door of practices, mainly focused on silent illumination and introspection of the mind. After the advent of Agricultural Chan, Chan Dharma, as a new approach to practices, focuses on the manual work of physical manipulation. "Agricultural Chan" can be described as a "revolution" of Chan practices with Chinese special farming tradition.

2.2. The Necessity of "Farming" in the Garden

In the exploration of gardens and farming in the context of Chinese literati culture, it is important to understand the significance of gardens as both a setting for intellectual and artistic activities and as a reflection of the literati's values and ideals. Clunas (1996) emphasizes that gardens were not just the backdrop for literati pursuits, but their construction and maintenance were activities akin to the creation of calligraphy, painting, and poetry (p. 12). The literati gardens provided a space for escape, reflection, and creative expression, as highlighted by Murck (2000) in the context of Song China (p. 79). Rinaldi (2012) emphasizes the dual purpose of literati gardens, where the owner could retreat from the world, engage in scholarly pursuits, and cultivate plants for their aesthetic, medicinal, or culinary properties (p. 35). This idea of cultivating plants for various purposes links back to the concept of farming within the gardens, which played a significant role in the lives of literati.

Ironically, in the opinion of many literati, the land of Jiangnan was not suitable for farming. In Wu Weiye's 吳偉業 "Returning to the Village and Farm" 歸村躬耕記 in the Qing dynasty, it is stated that: "My city is a remote and primitive seaside, with ruined unpaved ditches, shoes being immersed in shenchi 沈斥 and dirty juru 沮洳. The yearly harvest was frequently and repeatedly missed each year. The tax is calculated on a daily basis, so why should those who live here be pleased to farm?" (W. Wu 2008, p. 254). What is "shenchi 沈斥"? Salt and alkaline land. What is "juru 沮洳"? A marshy quagmire. In the area of Jiangsu and Zhejiang province, not only is there the lake of Taihu, but also the sea and the world beyond. In the remote and primitive seaside, how can farming be convenient? What is the pleasure of farming? The "sea" of the so-called "seashore" is often a place of uncontrollable barbarism in ancient context; anything associated with the "sea" has an inherent meaning of portentousness. What is the necessity of "farming" under such conditions? What Wu Weiye mentioned is the land of Jiangnan, but not the garden of Jiangnan, which shares different material foundation. Regarding this situation, there are two reasons for "farming" in gardens.

Firstly, they are coerced by the reality of their predicament. The owner of the garden needed "food". Zhu Shou 朱綬 in the Qing dynasty recounted a period of his experience in his book "*Notes on Moving House* 移居圖記" that: "I live in a place where the door cannot pass a horse, where there is a hall without a high ceiling, and where my hands can touch the eave tiles. The garden is too small to grow flowers and fruits. I live with my wife downstairs and have no place to put my clothes. In front of the hall, there is a yi 簷 (side room), which is much shorter than the hall. Beyond the wall is the neighbor's cookhouse, and the smoke blows over at every turn. The narrow space on the left side of the building

made two small houses for cooking and taking water, covered by a large mulberry tree on top. However, there was no such thing as a bathroom, a rice and flour jar or a wine jar..... I was over thirty years old, haggard face with melancholy. I had no choice but to settle down my home here, like a wren perched on a branch" (S. Zhu 2008, p. 106). The "arrogance" of the garden owner is to be detached from the secular life, and here, Zhu Shou obviously did not reach this status at all. As he described that the smoke from his neighbour's chimney at lunchtime moves to his house from time to time while he had nothing but a few old books that he had saved up, not even a rice bowl. Zhu Shou said that he was like a bird perched on a tree branch, and his words were filled with loneliness.

The food that came from farming was simply a way to make ends meet for those sorehead literati. The position of officials may rise and fall from generation to generation, and family fortune could be lost and devalued in an instant. That 'farming in garden' was always needed in real life, and the memories of the garden owner's unpleasant childhood would not be diluted or reduced, but is likely to be magnified and intensified. There is a quote from Li Dongyang's 李東陽 "*Record of East Village* 東莊記" in the Ming dynasty that said, "The Wu family have lived in this village for several generations. From the Yuan dynasty to the early Ming dynasty, nine out of ten of the neighbours died and moved away, but only the Wu family survived. When his father died and the family moved west, he returned to his old job, not daring to abandon it, and was careful to clear the soil, hoe the ground, dredge the waterways, plant and weed, and work on time (Li 2008, p. 59). The "origin" of Baizhang's well-known dictum "those who do not work for one day, should not eat for one day (不作不食)" ought to be the idea that if you do not work, then there is no food available.

Secondly, they are tempted by seclusion and nature. The owner of the garden needs a leisurely vocation for refreshment. In the first line of Zhu Changwen's 朱長文 *Record of the Garden* 樂圃記 in the Song dynasty, it noted that: "If a man participate into the secular world and try to be successful, he will follow the ruler of Yao and the people of Yu, whose fortune and prosperity will flow to the world and to his descendants, and will have the same fame as Kui and Chi, and the same merit as Zhou and Shao. If they are detached from the idea of success in the secular world, they may fish, build, farm, or garden, adapt to the humid and marshy environment, shoulder with Huang and Qi, follow Yan and Zheng, and emulate Tao and Bai. The joy that one could attain from life is the same regardless of whether one's social situation is in a predicament or a prosperous rising stage." (C. Zhu 2008, p. 18). In the midst of advance and retreat, the distance between the official career and the secular ordinary life is the tension and flexibility that emerged in the two choices, two paths, and two moods of life for most ancient Chinese literati. Farming in the garden is not the means of production of livelihood for most peasants, but an expression of life attitude for a few literati who reject official careers and live in the remote mountains. This cloistered option connotates a mind that life is transient like boarding in this world. It also indicates the openness of an uninhibited man who sits and forgets, who does nothing and holds an attitude of frankness towards life.

Thirdly, gardens are treasured not only for their aesthetic appeal, but also for the plants cultivated within them. According to Hardie (2004), garden culture in China has a long history, and plants played an important role in both the literati and imperial gardens (p. 3). This is also mentioned by Hargett (1988), who describes the Genyue, a wonderland created by Emperor Huizong, where nature was imitated and controlled, and plants were grown for their beauty and utility (p. 150).This suggests that farming and gardening were not only practical pursuits but also had deeper philosophical and symbolic meanings for the literati. It is worth noting that the "crops" in the garden, compared with other plants, such as decorative flowers and trees, are isolated from each other. This is highlighted in Wen Zhenheng's 文震亨 *Record of Growing Things*, "Flowers and Trees" 長物誌· 花木: "A bean shed vegetable garden, mountain flavor, but if you plow acres of land in the center of the garden, it is far from an artistic pursuit with good taste." (Wen 2011, p. 441). What can be planted in the garden to make it "charming"? Gnarled and ancient branches, exotic

flowers and grasses, isolated and sparse ones that are not so prosperous and redundant can be used as decoration. It is not only inappropriate to plant bean and vegetable beds in the center part of the garden, but also for peach and plum, while plum and apricot's florescence are short-lived and should not be planted in abundance. This means that the garden owner's affirmation of the spiritual value of the 'crops' in the garden is very limited and even contemptuous. The plants in the gardens are essentially more like auspiciousness, used to mark the 'high and pure' taste of the garden owner who, "despite being in the market place, has the aura of the mountains and forests" (Wei 2008, p. 21). The dominant logic of the garden is 'visual logic', 'archaic logic', the logic of time and vicissitudes—deliberate isolation of "blank space" is, in fact, another expression of pragmatism. The various hypothesis of "farming" in gardens cannot hide its inner hypocrisy. If "farming" in gardens has its spiritual value in the world, these values are merely limited to the transient moments of the act of "farming", in a narrow level of concrete activities, for the literati valued the process and deportments within farming rather than the crops.

2.3. Early Monastic Groups and "Farming" in the Garden

In India, gardens were one of the quintessential places where the Buddha left the palace and newly developed urban community for meditative practice. As Aśvaghoṣa described in *Life of the Buddha (Buddhakarita)*, it was in the forest and garden that Buddha reached his first jñāna, the stage of meditation. The Buddha usually had two criteria for choosing a place for his sermons, purity and vastness, and gardens fit the demands. For example, the garden of the prince of the gods, Gita, in the city of Shiva, was far enough away from trouble to accommodate a thousand people: "a garden of a yojana, wide and luxuriant" (Yuan and Ming 2002, p. 76). "Yojana" is a unit of length, either the distance a bull travels in a day with its yoke on, or the distance an emperor marches in a day, or about 11.2 km, or about 16 km, indefinitely. According to the "Pingjiang Map" of Suzhou in the Southern Song Dynasty, the ancient city of Suzhou is about 4.5 km from north to south and 3.5 km from east to west. Purity aside, such a vast garden is by no means of the same magnitude as a private garden in Jiangnan.

As for China, the early monks who separated from their original families and entered monastic life as a novice(chujia 出家) had no constant source of economic income, so farming was and will remain a prerequisite for their livelihood regardless of at a secular home or monastic community. In Dao Heng's 道衡 "Commentary on Refutation" 釋駁論, he mentioned the criticisms made against monks by the public opinion at that time: "As for the monks, they have no respite in their pursuit, or they cultivate fields and gardens in the same way as farmers, or they compete with others for profits in commerce and trade, or they rely on medical science to make light of the cold and the heat, or they are resourceful and heretical in order to help their livelihood, or they accumulate the fortunes and misfortunes of the world, or they boasting so as to profit from the ordinary people" (Sengyou 1990, p. 35). What is the meaning of "cultivating fields and gardens the same way as farmers" and "boasting so as to profit from the people"? The explanation of Dao Heng 道衡 is that "the body needs cloth to wear because it has no hair and feathers, and the belly is not a Lagenaria that does not need to be fed, and it does not mean producing and possessing more than one's need to an extreme, but indicates a situation that when the year is rich, they take enough from the people, and when the time is tough, they exert themselves to be economically autonomous (Sengyou 1990, p. 36). That monks also need supplies for livelihood and had to resort to farming self-sufficiency

It is noteworthy that in the Chan monastic regulations, monks are not directly responsible for planting flowers and trees or handling gardening. In the Baizhang qinggui (Baizhang Rules of Purity) 百丈清規, there is a clear occupation named "dianzuo 典座", whose main duty is to instruct the monks to follow the regulations and disciplines, for example, to ensure that the food for the meal is clean and free from overeating or wastefulness, as well as to obey some necessary dining etiquette. Among these duties of "dianzuo 典座", there is also one namely "urge gardeners to farm and plant in a timely manner"

(Dehui 1968, p. 681). It is clear from this illustration that there were specialized 'gardeners' in the Chan monasteries, and monks did not need to participate in the gardening work by themselves. The specific work of the gardener is also mentioned in the Baizhang qinggui(Baizhang Rules of Purity) 百丈清規: "Gardener should be hardworking and diligent, take the lead in planting vegetables, irrigating them in time so as to supply the hall kitchen to ensure that there is no shortage" (Dehui 1968, p. 682). Here the "gardener" is responsible for planting vegetables and supplying the kitchen, which is closer to the essential meaning of the word 'farming' in Agricultural Chan.

3. The Agrarian Aesthetic in the Garden

The engagement of farming in the garden is a crucial component that constitutes the aesthetic life of the garden owner. Rather than being a spiritual product, the garden is a domain that links the material and the spiritual level together. It seems that farming in the garden is to provide food, but in fact, it is an aesthetic place that is shaped by the physical actions of people. On this basis, 'farming' in garden is a blend of strong 'agricultural Chan' beauty and an aesthetic realm with the significance of 'Agricultural Chann'.

3.1. The Aesthetic Essence of Farming in the Garden

The aesthetic essence of farming in a garden essentially lies in the fact that the purpose of gardening is to build a sense of beauty. "Farming" is a physical action of personal behaviour, which is neither beautiful nor unattractive. The beauty of farming is mainly forged in its provision of possibility. This possibility indicates the anticipated process of crops' natural growth in the garden as well as from a causality standpoint. Such Beauty is endowed with an inclination towards a 'process philosophy', focusing on the physical action and personal experience and is necessarily a socialised process of looking back and observing from the causality position.

On the one hand, "farming" in garden is a process. Farming in garden can provide food. The food comes in different shapes, smells, is edible and has a moral goodness for its use, a goodness that is physically meaningful; but the bringing of food itself is only a necessary but not a sufficient precondition for the aesthetic intervention of farming in garden. Then it comes to the essence of "gardening" which appears to be a process practised by the garden owner in which accomplished within a certain period of time and by the physical action of the individual. That the process is the meaning. On the other hand, "farming" in garden is "result-oriented". This "result" fails to obey an objective "cause and effect" logic, but is a result of the inner mind. That is to say, the garden owner has foreseen the whole process of the crops taking roots and growing to maturity at the starting point of farming. What accompanies this process is the garden owner's mentality of bridging this secular world with the transcendental other shores. Moreover, this "result" is also the fruit of reality. That the garden can certainly be spiritualised, but must perform its economical function of production. The food produced by garden farming might be used for sacrificial rituals, but it will first be eaten by the garden owner. Without food's connection with reality and mentality, farming in the garden cannot be intervened at the aesthetic level.

More importantly, here 'farming' is done within the garden. "It does not take place in the wilderness, where the relationship between man and nature is in a tense, conflicting rush, but only in the garden, in a poetic, patterned, ontologised 'farmland' within the garden, where man and nature are gentle and soothing. It is soft and relaxed. This 'farmland' is a special kind of place, which gathers together all the elements belonging to the garden, it is an idealised spiritual and personal place. "Nature" is a product of abstraction, but it still appears in a figurative concrete form, and has a sense of aesthetic.

3.2. The Aesthetic of "Agricultural Chan" in Garden Farming

The art of Chinese gardens is deeply rooted in the philosophy of balance and harmony, with every element carefully chosen and placed to create a unified and immersive experience (Feng 1985). Farming in the garden is not the equivalent of agricultural Chan. just

as Chan Dharma is not the equivalent of farming practices. However, agricultural Chan is bound to have profound impacts on farming activities in the garden, making farming in the garden infused with the aesthetic connotations of agriculture Chan.

Firstly, the devout attitude towards plants in the process of farming encompassed the spiritual principles of agricultural Chan. It is the *rangdu* (modest and gentle) 讓度 mentality that fills the garden owner's heart with admiration and exhilaration towards the plants and crops as well as everything in the universe. Chinese gardens are not merely collections of plants and buildings; they are symbolic recreations of the natural world, evoking the harmony between humans and nature (M. Keswick 2003). Moreover, this rangdu (modest and gentle) 讓度 mentality can be seen as the "gene" of "chanrang 禪讓" in Chan Buddhism, which has been confirmed by the Taoist philosophy of nature. With the egalitarian perception that "everything as the same 萬物等齊如一", crops are no longer the object that was driven by objectification for the reason that the Chan practitioner would consciously decentralized the subjectivity of the self-ego, diluting the contradictions and oppositions between subject and object, and rounding out the inner nature of the crop. This penetrates deep into the heart of the garden owner, enabling him to understand life in the process of farming, to revere all things, and to reap the joy of the Dharma.

Do grass and trees have consciousness in ancient literati's minds? This question receives a positive answer in the book *Nongsang Yishi Summaries* 農桑衣食撮要. While in reference to tree removal, it states that, "As the ancients used to say, there is no specific time to remove a tree, just do not let the tree know, add more previous soil and remember to take the southern branch" (Mingshan Lu 2011, p. 534). What is meant by "do not let the tree know"? If the tree has no sense, no consciousness, how can we talk about not letting the tree know? So, it is a common consensus that trees have their self nature and awareness. It is not the trees that I planted have connection with me, but every plant and tree in the universe is related to me for the reason that the self-nature of plants and trees is magnified, enriched and clarified rather than the magnification of my self ego. This is exemplified in Gong Xu's 龔詡 *Zhujing yuan ji* 駐景園記 of the Ming Dynasty, which records that: "I feel obliged and responsible to every plant and tree in the universe. If they are prosperous, I am also vigorous. If they are withering, I am also emaciated. The prosperity and withering of every grass and tree signified that fact I am included in the circulation of nature and the universe." (Xu Gong 2008, p. 257). In general, it is all about the experience of Dao. Gong apparently transformed his sagacious observation of the yearly prosperity and withering of grass and trees into his own personal experience of Dao in nature. In his description of the garden, the garden itself becomes the semiotic signified and epitome of the universe, while his epiphany is the experience brought by agriculture Chan in a logical sense.

In fact, the inner logic of Chan Buddhism is paccaya-pariggahanana (enlightenment to conditions), which enters the path of enlightenment and achieves one's epiphany through the process of seeing the changes in all things, especially the extinction and decay of things. It is said that the king attains enlightenment by watching the falling flowers, the bhikkhu attains enlightenment by listening to the sound of the bracelets, and the "farming" practices and farmland in Jiangnan gardens are the world that the ancient literati and scholars observed, heeded and immersed themselves in, in order to understand the truth and attain illuminations. The world owned by the garden owner is a "solitary and pure place, a secluded dwelling where one can observe the changes of things and become enlightened, where one can see the falling scenery in autumn and enter the true path, where the four seasons are in order, and one can change worries into joy, rest in the idle forest and be at ease" (Chuandeng 1968, p. 588). The so called paccaya-pariggahanana is in fact a solitary enlightenment. Solitary enlightenment means that it particularly awaiting the awakening of the crowd, and only by the time the crowd awakens can the owner of the garden truly create an aesthetic world for inner wanderings on a spiritual level. There is a good saying from Yongjia 永嘉: "Standing out in the Dharma Ending Period could reignite the flame of Buddha's lamp 無佛之世出興，作佛燈之後焰" (Chuandeng 1968, p. 588). The word "standing out 出興" is a critical word that punctuates the significance of the action. For the

literati class, in a world where there is no Buddha at the moment, "standing out" makes it possible to "dovetail" aesthetic creation with Buddhist enlightenment. The existence of farmland ensures the permanency of Buddhist transmission like a lamp never being extinguished. Then even if there is no tangible Buddha, there is an intangible Buddha.

Secondly, the physical practices of farming enrich the way in which the garden owner realises his aesthetic ideal of nature. That agricultural Chan concentrates on concrete farming activities and a dynamic Chan view of "the present moment", which leads the garden owner to understand farming in the garden as a way of meditative practices, and concretize the meditative practices into farming activities of the garden.

Agricultural Chan is accomplished in acts, movements and actions that are precisely related to farming activities. That agricultural Chan is no longer an aloofness, indifference or silent spectatorship towards farming, but a real participation in and influence on the process of plant growth. It can be said that this is a new kind of enlightenment, which acknowledge the importance of the realistic demand in the present moment-that crops are important and the method of agricultural Chan should finally be put into the practices of farming activities.

This pragmatic inclination also embodied in Li Guo's 李果 descriptions in Record of Drinking in Qingzhishan Hall 青芝山堂飲酒記 of Zhang Zigen's 張子艮 leisurely home life after his repair work on Xiangyi Han Gong's old garden that: "Returning home, he tended to his small fields and planted millet. During leisure time, he transcribed small collections of Song and Yuan scholars and listened to his two sons read. Occasionally, he played chess with guests. His demeanor was calm and peaceful" (Guo Li 2008, p. 59). What he planted is panicum, which is a kind of sorghum. It can be inferred from this description that farming and writing, teaching children and playing a chess game are not contradictory activities but complementary to each other. The point is that what Zhang Zigen planted is not exotic rare flowers or crops, but ordinary sorghum for food which can also be used for making wine. This might be the reason why Li Guo mentioned his farming activities.

Action, or more precisely, the implementation of agricultural Chan, endowed the garden owner with the inherent advantage of manual laborer's ability of "aloofness from the outer entanglements" due to farming self-sufficiency. In the first line of Gao Xunzhi's 高巽誌 *Record of farming and fishing* 耕漁軒記 in the Yuan dynasty: "In ancient times, people had fixed residential holdings, but they could not make profits through their house property. This cultivates an economically autonomous tradition that farmers diligently farm the field, the merchants trade and move from time to time, and the workers polish their tools and work. Though it is hard work but dare not retreat because of livelihood. If one withdraw from this self-suffiency lifestyle, it also means that it is hard to maintain "the aloofness from the outer entanglements and cultivate high moral standards" 獨善其身 (Xunzhi Gao 2008, pp. 176–77). The literati and officials' "aloofness from the outer entanglements and cultivation of high moral standards" was often accompanied by the social consideration and preparation of "contributions to the wellbeing of all". This realisation depends too much on society, especially on predetermined social 'positions' of class and power. In this sense, farming in the garden changed this predicament so that literati and officials could act like autonomous manual farmers which are more independent and accessible.

Ultimately, the aesthetic of garden farming is a creation of the aesthetic domain. The 'openness' agricultural Chan in the process of planting the crops evokes the garden owner to create a vigorous image of the life realm with birds flying in the sky and fish swimming in the ponds. In the design of Chinese garden architecture, the relationship between humans and nature is paramount, with elements such as rocks, water, and plants serving as both functional and symbolic components of the landscape. Like literary paintings and nihuaben (colloquial stories) 擬話本, agricultural Chan provides food for livelihood, but its pragmatic purpose is secondary to the shaping of an 'open' domain- a place that nurtures the spirituality and fits the body, where the spirits receive comforts and the body could have sentient feelings. That this world is not a closed loop or a lock, but a multifaceted and vigorous space where everything is intertwined and connected.

This is also the case in Han Yong's 韓雍 farming activities of the Ming dynasty in his book *Notes from Turnip Creek Cottage* 葑溪草堂記 about the basic layout of the thirty-acre garden on the east side of his house. It is recorded that: "There is a square pond in the middle, with a circumference of two hundred paces, and the stream comes from the southeast and injects itself into it" (Yong Han 2008, p. 58). This statement is crucial, as it provides an important clue to the map of the Turnip Creek Cottage, the layout of which is implicitly based on the eight trigrams of King Wen—the southeast is the xun position, and the water from the southeast harnesses the wind, which is precisely a warm current. Han Yong 韓雍 then "ordered Zi Wen to mow and weed" (Yong Han 2008, p. 58), which is the start of his garden farming. We find that Han Yong's 韓雍 farming activities were basically around the water of the pond, and are implemented through the act of farming and planting. Before that, he put "Jia fish" in the pond, built "a hall with three pillars" in the north of the pond, and stacked with a rockery in the south of the pond. Since then, it has been planted with extensive grass and trees. In the north of the pond, there were orchids in front of the hall, old laurels on the left and right side of the pond, and bamboo near the wall. The varieties of bamboo are Gui West spotted bamboo, Gui East purple bamboo, and gold jasper bamboo. There were peaches, plums, apricot and more than 100 miscellaneous trees outside the bamboo area. In the south of the pool, there were hundreds of chrysanthemums. In the southeast of the pool, there were five ancient plum trees, and 300 citrus trees, cherry, loquat, ginkgo, pomegranate, Xuan pear, walnut and Haimen persimmon. There was a small pond in the southwest of the garden with red lotus in it, and 200 mulberry trees, jujube, acacia, catalpa, elm, and willow surrounding. The rest of the empty space of the garden was vegetables in rows. Therefore, Han Yong's so-called "Turnip Creek Cottage" was actually based on the water coming from the southeast and a result of planting no less than six hundred trees in the main body of the pond.

Why plant such a large and diverse range of trees? Han Yong's own explanation is that "the nature of things is changing from time to time, thus it can satisfy the daily demand of the family through four seasons of a year. When it is snowing and rainy days, or when the moon and winds are clear and fresh, it is also a pleasant time to invite friends and guests to walk and play around for entertainment, which can help people forget the worries and pressures in the mundane world. In this case, it is inappropriate to plant bizarre and precious flowers and trees which are easy to be stolen by people who are greedy" (Yong Han 2008, p. 58). Han Yong's criterion is clear: he refuses to plant bizarre and precious trees because planting itself is not to satisfy his own curiosity or greed. That planting is merely an authentic act of planting whose original meaning is to experience time through plants. What is the nature of time? What we know for the moment, is the fact that 'the nature of things is different and changing from time to time'—time is embodied through the nature of natural things, especially plants, which are more crucial than defining time itself. In other words, what Han Yong seeks to bring to light is a natural world permeated by time in the form of planting. This world as an integration of time and space must be an aesthetic world.

In fact, under the influence of agricultural Chan, trees were indispensable in gardens. In Wang Shizhen's 王世貞 *Record of Uncle's Jing'an Gong's Mountain Garden* 先伯父靜庵公山園記, there is a sentence that reads, "The magnificence of the mountains cannot be counted, largely due to the design that the rocks are clever in qutai 取態 (taking the form), the fruit trees are clever in bikui 避虧 (filling the blank), the flowers and grass are clever in chenlai 承睞 (embellishment), and the pavilions are clever in jusheng 據勝 (occupying the best view spot)" (Shizhen Wang 2008, p. 251). The rocks and pavilions are easy to understand, and the question rises to the plants. Why is it necessary for trees to "bikui 避虧"? The fruit trees are the supplement of 'blank space'. What does it mean by "chenlai 承睞"? It means that the flowers and grass are subjected to an unintended sideways glance, not a frontal glance and they are good at being the supporting role. The flowers and trees are not the 'main scene', they are a coordinating complementary, but it is this secondary, marginal,

'non-mainstream' imagery that gives the beauty of the mountain its layers, its profusion and variation.

Thus, nature in the farming activities of the garden is a realm of aesthetic which one permeates his life in the texture of nature, becoming part of it, achieving the encounterments with nature. Agricultural Chan connects "being" and "non-being" which fosters the meaning of nature image from an individual's confined subjective knowledge and encapsulates the integration of the whole of nature as a life value. As a result, the owner of Jiangnan garden enhances the domestic concept of "spiritual traveling with things 物與神遊" which highlights the fluidity as well as the disillusionment of nature imagery. Through the interactions and dialogues between man and nature, a vigorous and dynamic realm of heaven and earth is shaped.

4. Conclusions

Chan Buddhism is a quintessential example in Chinese Buddhist history, which originated from the practices of mind and body, but moved from silent illumination and static contemplation to agricultural Chan. It combines the characteristics of Chinese farming culture, which includes taking care of one's body and mind through concrete farming activities. Agricultural Chan was originally a life practice that the monks "learn" from the lay people, but in the end, it "flows back" and "fit" into the monastic life of the monks. It can be seen that "everyday practices" is the priority matters, and that so-called 'beauty' comes mainly from 'life'. The literati and scholars imitated the monks who practised meditative practices through farming in their gardens which helps to liberate themselves from the inner fatigue of paperwork. They embrace nature and gain its rewards in return. As a special form and process, "farming in garden" undoubtedly enriched the beauty of the garden to a more multifaceted level, and also practised the beauty of agricultural Chan, making them more complementary to each other.

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Nature, Place, and Ritual: Landscape Aesthetics of Jingfu Mountain "Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands" in South China

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Abstract: The "Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands" (*dongtian and fudi*, 洞天福地) is a unique concept of sacred space in China and even in East Asia, combining beautiful natural scenery, rich historical heritage, and diverse cultural heritage. This paper tries to explain Mount Jingfu's (*jingfu shan*, 靜福山) aesthetic representations. The results show that the landscape's physical environment projects the spatio-temporal system and the concept of the universe in Daoist aesthetic ideals. With the spatial evolution of divine immortals' abodes from imagination to reality, people's yearning for divine cave palaces is transformed into their connection with and their expression of the palaces in exploring space interests and aesthetic trends that are then integrated into the secular life of thousands of households through living religious rituals. Preserved by local religious believers, the ritual activities incorporated geographic, familial, and divine interactions, and characterised essential social aesthetics. By exploring a typical case of Lingnan Region (*lingnan*, 嶺南, an old term for South China), this paper aims to elucidate the significance of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands as living heritage in contemporary society across multiple dimensions, and to provide a theoretical basis for the protection of its system.

Keywords: Dao; nature; space; ritual; Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands; Mount Jingfu; cultural landscape

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1. Introduction

Taoism is a traditional Chinese religion, advocating "the Way follows nature", pursuing the attainment of immortality and the creation of celestial paradises in the human world. This idea is achieved by combining idolised nature and landscape worship with the realities of life, thereby constructing a uniquely earthly paradise, known as the Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands. As functional spaces in reality, these heavenly paradises have served as the practice sites for generations of Taoist practitioners. Their construction must have a closer connection to the real world, and accessibility should be a crucial consideration in the creation of these spaces. For example, legendary immortal islands like Kunlun and Penglai, known from mythology, have limited their popularity and development due to their inaccessibility. Therefore, upon absorbing the ancient tales of heavenly paradises, Taoism derived a more expansive system of mythical lands supported by mountains, thereby connecting the legend of the human and mythical world. The Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands thus become one of the most aesthetically characteristic spatial forms within it.

The spatial imagery system of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands (*dongtian and fudi*, 洞天福地) originated from ancient Chinese folklore about the abode of the gods. It has since gained widespread recognition by both the populace and the government and become a classic theme for artistic creation, representing the multi-level aesthetic interaction between humans, nature, culture and society that remains a characteristic feature of traditional Chinese culture.

A widespread cultural emblem, the landscape has been examined in numerous studies. In general, the theoretical research frameworks have been developed on landscape archetypes (Xie 2021), landscape layouts (Miao et al. 2017), and landscape systems (Chen and Tan 2021), which outline the elemental paradigm, structural paradigm, and system paradigm of the landscape of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands from material space (Chai 2022). However, the intangible beliefs and ritual practices embodied in it are mostly studied within a national–local macro context (Brace et al. 2006). This overlooks the appreciation and reconstitution of the landscape as a living religious landscape heritage on regional ecological environment, humanistic and artistic aesthetics, and social and contemporary contexts during its continuous development (Cooper 1990).

This study shows that the cultural landscape of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands has a strong cultural association with natural elements, including "direct or tangible links with remarkable and significant events, living traditions, beliefs, and works of art or literature". This living landscape heritage, passed down from generation to generation, retains its original religious function. Maintained by local religious believers, the landscape has witnessed the continuous adaptation and evolution of integrating the tangible media and intangible human cultural forces in response to the changes in the social environment. It is the best starting point for understanding the spiritual connection between human and nature (Du and Han 2019). The cultural landscape theory aims to explain the aesthetics and connotations of landscapes, which provides a holistic vision for the protection of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands. Under this theory, not only the naturalness, but also the intangible cultural contents such as traditional cognition, spiritual practices and living customs of human society can be focused (Verschuuren 2007). As Samuels states, "landscape is a representation of its creator". Understanding the aesthetic representations of a landscape requires an understanding of the role of the ideas and behaviours of landscape designers throughout its formation (Samuels 1979). In the study of cultural landscapes, aesthetics are not self-evident but need to be interpreted through systematic representation before being engaged in the process of socio-cultural production (Stuart 1997).

Mount Jingfu was constructed in accordance with the cosmic concept of 'Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands', each of its environment and architecture bearing their own unique aesthetic and symbolic significance. The relationship between Mount Jingfu and its surrounding landscape, natural elements, culture, and even settlements was not created accidentally, but lies upon the sacred concepts held by local people. From an architectural research perspective, space is a type of objectively existing physical environment, whereas place refers to spiritual spaces rife with aesthetic meaning, representing the interaction and fusion of psychological and physical fields (Cresswell 2014). Space tends more towards construction, but a place leans more towards aesthetics and activity (Norberg-Schulz 1980). The study of spatial aesthetics encompasses both the objective nature of the aesthetic object and the sensory experience of the aesthetic subject. By elucidating the aesthetic representations of the Mount Jingfu landscape, one can infer the local believers' understanding of the universe, that is, what the local people's spiritual world is like, how they live within it, and how this spiritual world interacts with and relates to the development of China's *dongtian and fudi* culture. Replacing the geographical determinism with the theory of multi-dimensional spatial interactions, from the perspective of natural landscapes and cultural groups' interactions, provides extensive explanation for the aesthetic representations of *dongtian and fudi*, melting the traditional academic segregation of material nature and immaterial spirit, culture and nature (Livingstone et al. 1998).

This paper attempts to follow inductive research as exploration logic and analyse the aesthetic representations of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands from a more macroscopic natural landscape pattern, constantly changing historical and cultural backgrounds, social and era spirits. Furthermore, it will extract the deep structural model of the landscape's aesthetic development, reveal its aesthetic themes of common significance and aesthetic differences, and establish the key point of the link between philosophical aesthetics and religious landscape. This will provide a more comprehensive and enlightened vision for

global theoretical research on religious art and aesthetics and will contribute to clarifying the uniqueness of China's localised religious aesthetics in international comparisons. Focusing on aesthetic representations of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands helps us to identify Chinese perceptions of their surroundings, time and space imagery and the origins of such perceptions.

2. Materials and Methods

The first-hand historical materials can be categorised into three types based on different aesthetic subjects: (1) the local chronicles and stele inscriptions compiled by the officials of Guangdong Province and Lianzhou City; (2) the poems, travelogues and paintings authored by tourists like literati; and (3) the live texts including oral histories and on-site research by users. The first category initially shows the natural geographical environment, historical development overview and spatial evolution process of Mount Jingfu. The second category shows the overall scene of Mount Jingfu's participation in constructing a local landscape set and iconic scenery system in Lianzhou City. The third category demonstrates the representations of familial, geographic and divine ties between Mount Jingfu and Bao'an Town, which jointly organise the worshipping rituals of Great Spirit.

Building on the findings of cultural landscape theories and landscape architecture aesthetics theories rooted in value theory philosophy, this research constructs an analytical framework for landscape representation, which covers nature, society, and humanity and elaborates on three significant aspects: the natural environment, spatial and landscape changes, and ritual activities. Based on the aesthetics of natural geography, the cosmology of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands is elaborated. The evolution of architectural space and the construction of the eight-scene system connecting the inside and outside of the landscape is analysed. The familial, geographic, and divine relationships that are represented by ritual activities are discussed from the perspective of daily life while avoiding the grand national–local narrative.

3. Overview of the Development of Mount Jingfu

In the Northern Song Dynasty, *Zhang Junfang* (張君房), a scholar-official, compiled an anthology of the Daoist Canon entitled The Yunji qiqian (雲笈七籤), which records Mount Jingfu as follows: "Mount Jingfu (*jingfu shan*, 靜福山) ranked 49th among the Seventy-two Daoist Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, is located in Bao'an Town, Lianzhou City, Qingyuan City, Guangdong Province, China" (Zhang 2003) (Figure 1).

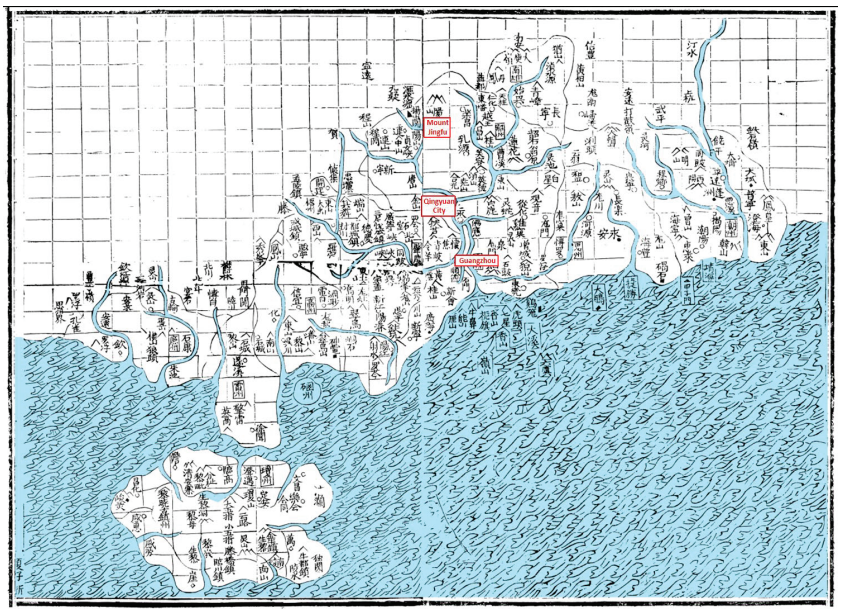

Figure 1. Geographic location of Mount Jingfu.

In the third year of the Zhongdatong era (531 A.D.), about 1500 years ago, Liao Chong, an attendant of Commandery Prince of Xiangdong (湘東王), came here for self-cultivation. He preached at Mount Jingfu for 40 years, and after his death, his believers worshipped him as the Protector Deity of the place (Guo 1996). In the Song Dynasty, Liao was ennobled as the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness (*lingxi zhenjun*, 靈禧真君) by Emperor Zhenzong, Emperor Shenzong, and Emperor Xiaozong. The orthodoxy of Taoism at Mount Jingfu was gradually strengthened and enlisted in the official sacrificial rites, leading to its heyday.

During the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism was introduced to Mount Jingfu. Du Guangting, a Daoist priest of the Five Dynasties, recorded in the Boundary Separation Experience on Mount Jingfu (*jingfushan fenjie yan*, 靜福山分界驗): "Some monks built a courtyard around the Daoist abbey, and also occupied its place to set up warehouses. Liao Shenjiao took out the official documents and theorised with them. On that night, a tiger roared and howled, biting off trees, destroying the grass, scratching out marks on the ground to leave traces. These marks clarified the monastic boundary, and the governor Jiang Fang erected a stone monument to commemorate the event".

In the Song Dynasty, in Volume 92 of the Record of Scenic Spots Across the Country (*yudi jisheng*, 輿地紀勝), the author Wang Xiangzhi recorded: "As for Tiger Spring (*hupao quan*, 虎跑泉), it was once recorded that 'at the end of the Tang Dynasty, a monk Xing Yuan lived here. One day a tiger ran around the place, roaring and howling. Later came out a spring. So it got the name Tiger Spring'"(Wang 2005).

At the end of the Tang Dynasty, Tianqu Academy (天衢書院), the earliest academy in Lingnan District, was founded here. Until the Song Dynasty, it had become the most famous academy in Lingnan District. In the Northern Song Dynasty, the famous Chinese chancellor Zhang Jun took his son, Zhang Shi, to live in Lianzhou City, and composed a number of poems in five-character eight-line regulated verse. He "selected the eight most outstanding locations along it (Huangchuan River), named them with praise", and called them "the eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River" (*huangchuan bajing*, 湟川八景)[1] as a whole, making it one of the earliest eight scenes in China. Among all, Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests (*jingfu and hanlin*, 靜福寒林) is a depiction of Mount Jingfu (Figure 2). In the Ming Dynasty, people built the Wandering Cup Pond (*liubei chi*, 流杯池), where literati gathered, drinking and writing poems. They composed poems and named the landscapes in the mountain, which were collectively known as "the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu" (*fushan bajing*, 福山八景)[2]. In later years, Daoist priests continued to enter the mountain for self-cultivation, and monks built monasteries here. As a result, Mount Jingfu had developed into an area integrating Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism with Taoism as the centre.

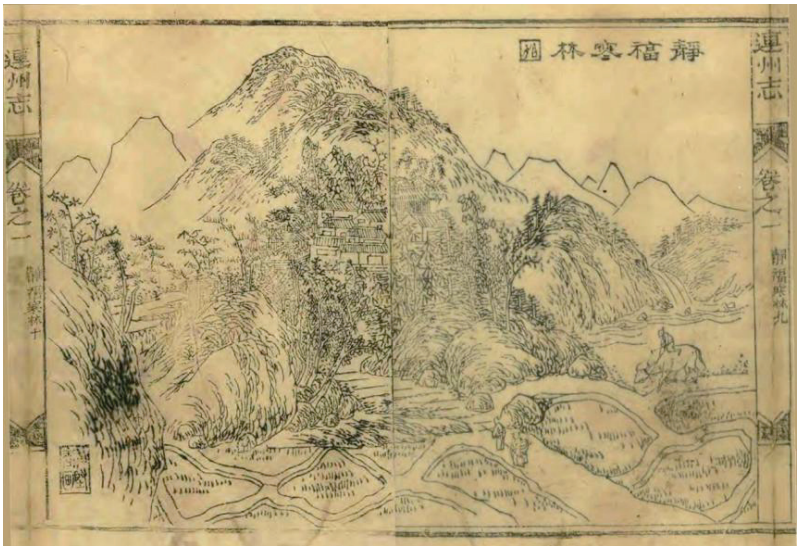

Figure 2. A print of Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests from *Lianzhou zhi*.

Mount Jingfu in Lianzhou City features the standardised prototype of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands and continues to reshape its aesthetic representations in the integration with local cultures, human activities, and the natural environment. It is manifested in the landscape remodelling caused by social aesthetic demand and collective memory change, reflecting the long-term and profound interaction and unity of naturalness, culture and sociality. The connection between the Jingfu mountain, its surrounding natural environment, cultures, and even villages is not accidental, but is based on the conceptual divine systems of the natives. By analysing the aesthetic representations, one can deduce the cosmology of the local Daoists. To be exact, it is possible to further explain what their spiritual world is and how they live in it, as well as how the local spiritual world relates to and interacts with the cultural development of other Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands in China.

4. Aesthetics of Natural Geography

The Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands are a system of sacred spaces unique to traditional Chinese culture, originating from the worship of mountains in ancient China. The mountains served as crucial vehicles in the development of the landscape. Early Daoist practitioners sought out the nearest place to the immortals, and they believed that mountains were the residence of deities and were rich in material resources for the production of golden elixir. According to a Daoist canon titled the *Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (Inner Chapters, 抱樸子內篇): "Anyone who practiced Taoism, prepared elixirs, and secluded themselves from chaos, invariably chose to live in mountains" (Ge 2002). The author Ge Hong associates entering the mountains with searching for immortality. The tales and legends of eminent Daoists and immortals at Mount Jingfu reinforce the sacred qualities of the spatial system of the mountain. In the Local Chronicles of Guangdong in Qing Dynasty (*Guangdong tongzhi*, 廣東通志), Hao Yulin writes, "Mount Lianyang borders on Mount Jiuyi, and its range connects to Mount Heng. River Lu comes from the west and Huangchuan River flows to the east. Mount Jingfu and Lengjia are full of spiritual energy! Thousands of mountains are in continuous succession, streams and rivers meandering among them" (Hao n.d.). In Chinese traditional cosmology of the Unity of Heaven and Man (*tianren heyi*, 天人合一), the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands bridge the two realms of earth and the celestial world, expanding the immortal mountains and sacred places in the Daoist legends to the famous mountains and rivers in the folk reality. The natural landscapes became the concrete manifestation of people's imaginary wonderland.

Water sources were a crucial consideration for Daoist practitioners when selecting the location of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands due to their necessity for alchemy, religious practices, and daily life. In the Five Dynasties (907 A.D.–979 A.D.), Du Guangting compiled the *Records of the Numinous Efficacy of the Daoist Teaching* (*daojiao lingyan ji*, 道教靈驗記). Its second volume, *Boundary Separation Experience on Mount Jingfu*, notes: "Mount Jingfu Abbey located in Lianzhou City was the site where the immortal Liao Chong ascended in flight. His dwelling rested beside a stream, ornamented with stalagmites and unique trees that made the place an exquisite destination" (Du n.d.). The *Record of Scenic Spots Across the Country* (*yudi jisheng*, 輿地紀勝) records the naming source Tiger Spring here. The Stream Well (*jianjin*, 澗井), Fountainhead (*yuanquan*, 源泉), Ping Pool (*pingchi*, 平池) and Blissful Well (*fuzijing*, 福字井, a well designed in the shape of the Chinese character 福) of the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu, facilitating the Daoist priests who practiced alchemy and lived here. In addition, Bao'an River running on the east side of Mount Jingfu conforms to the water environment for alchemy as described in the *Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (Inner Chapters, 抱樸子). "It is situated beside a renowned mountain, overlooking the eastward stream. Residing here for spiritual practice, one can achieve immortality within six hundred days."

The selection of Mount Jingfu is in line with the Daoist ideal model of a mountainous environment. Located amidst the Nanling Mountains and on the banks of the Bao'an River, Mount Jingfu has long been renowned for its spiritual excellence and as a dwelling place for the immortals. The poetry on Mount Jingfu always epitomises its lofty and wintry

features. Moreover, in Lianzhou City, the northeast monsoon prevails in winter with a dry and cold climate, and the southwest monsoon prevails in summer with high temperatures and rain. With such natural climates, it is particularly essential to consider a microclimate for wind and vital energy accumulation when selecting a site to provide a comfortable environment for living and practicing. Mount Jingfu is backed by a large mountain in the north, which creates a huge natural barrier, blocking the cold air in winter and shielding the warm currents inside the mountain from dissipation. Its south-west side is the entrance to the outside world and the air entrance of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands. In front of the mountain is a vast plain, with Bao'an River on the left. The moist air currents brought by the river are blown into the mountain steadily. The natural landscape of Mount Jingfu blocks itself from the northeast cold in winter and channels the warm airflow of the southwest monsoon in summer, thus regulating the microclimate for practicing and living inside and shaping the environment into one with wind and gas accumulation (*cangfeng and juqi*, 藏風聚氣). Mount Jingfu is surrounded by mountains from three sides, with a high surrounding and a low centre. In the middle, there is a small basin with underground springs. From the perspective of the ideal landscape in ancient China, it conforms to the Hu Tian pattern (*hutian*, 壺天, a pot with the world inside, representing the land of immortals) of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, and is an ideal geomantic treasure land.

The spatial aesthetics of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, where mountains and water are intertwined, exemplifies the Daoist construction of sacred space in the mountains (Zheng et al. 2020). As the basic domain of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, the mountains associate with the natural landscape spatial sequence. Additionally, the traditional cosmology concept of the unity of heaven and man has endowed the mountains with divinity. Therefore, an aesthetic transformation from a standardised landscape space to a thematic Grotto-Heaven and Blissful Land is achieved.

5. Aesthetics of Place

5.1. Aesthetics of Spatial Scenes

Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands reflect both the unique characteristics of the natural environment and the cultural spirit of mankind (Lv 2018). The palace complex of Mount Jingfu's Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands builds an overall orderly spatial layout with support from the natural environment of the landscape. The production of space theory regards space as a site of specific behaviours and an accumulation of ideologies. Examining the construction of spatial scenes from a developmental perspective helps to understand the cultural relations that a space represents. The construction of the spatial scene of Mount Jingfu began with the legends of deities and saints. Before the Ming Dynasty, the Abbey of Real Lord Liao Chong (*Liaozhenjun Guan*, 廖真君觀) was dominant in the layout. Later, with the engagement of Buddhists, literati and scholars, this area gradually developed into a sacred spatial pattern where the architecture of the three religions co-existed.

Qingxv Temple (*qingxv guan*, 清虛觀) of Mount Jingfu was built in the third year of the Zhongdatong era of the Southern Liang Dynasty (531 A.D.). As the Monument to Liao Chong at Mount Jingfu of Lianzhou City (連州靜福山廖先生碑銘) reads, "Liao Chong, whose given name is Chong and who styled himself as Qingxv (清虛). Mount Jingfu was home to him. In the third year of the Datong era of the Southern Liang Dynasty (529 A.D.), he lived in this mountain. And in the second year of Guangda era of the Southern Chen Dynasty (568 A.D.), he died here at the age of ninety-seven" (Liu 2011). As recorded in the *Records of Lianzhou Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness* (*lianzhou lingxi zhenjun ji*, 連州靈禧真君記), "One day, people lost track of where Liao went, and thus worshiped his residence as a Daoist temple. They named the temple "Qingxv" (Liao's courtesy name) and reserved his altars for ritual offerings and cinnabar stove. People revered him and kept the temple to worship the immortals of the Highest Clarity Sect" (Zheng n.d.). In the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism was introduced here. Since then, Mount Jingfu became a place where Daoist and Buddhist cultures coexisted. The previous version of *Da Qing Yi Tong Zhi* (a book about historical geography of Qing Dynasty) states that "Tianqu Academy lies

at Mount Jingfu, north of the city. In the Five Dynasties, a native named Huang Sun read there" (Mu and Pan n.d.).

At the end of the Tang Dynasty, Mount Jingfu was equipped with educational facilities. The earliest academy in Lingnan District, Tianqu Academy (天衢書院), was established there. The place was continuously honoured by Emperor Zhenzong (真宗), Emperor Shenzong (神宗) and Emperor Xiaozong (孝宗) of the Song Dynasty, and in the first year of the Yuanfeng era (元豐元年) of Emperor Shenzong (1078 A.D.), Liao Chong was ennobled as the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness. As written in the local chorography, "During the Longxing era (1163–1164 A.D.) of the Song Dynasty, the Heavenly texts appeared several times, totally more than one hundred and twenty volumes. Emperor Xiaozong granted the title of 'Abbey of the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness (*lingxi zhenjun guan*, 靈禧真君觀)'. The hall is grand and spacious. On the east and west are the Emperor Calligraphy Memorial Hall (*yushu ge*, 禦書閣) and the Hongyin Building (洪音樓) (Hao n.d.). To the left and right are the Pavilion of Three Clarities (*sanqing dian*, 三清殿) and Pavilion of the Jade King (*yuhuang dian*, 玉皇殿). From the centre to the north, there is the Pavilion of the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness (*lingxi dian*, 靈禧殿). On its west side lies Jinjian Pavilion (金簡亭). The buildings had decayed over the years. In the first year of the Duanping era (端平元年) of Emperor Lizong of the Song Dynasty (1234 A.D.), the government and citizens collectively raised funds to reconstruct the temples, restoring them to their former glory. In the summer of the next year (1235 A.D.), the place suffered a drought. The local governor Liu Yuan prayed at the Abbey of the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness and was answered with timely rain, so he donated money for its renovation" (Wu n.d.). The officials of Lianzhou City reported the event to the emperor, who praised the Real Lord Liao Chong, and included him in the official sacrificial rites, which led to a flourishing of palaces and abbeys at Mount Jingfu. Throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties, these architectural spaces underwent multiple reconstructions and expansions. During the early Qing Dynasty, the architectural layout of Mount Jingfu was basically set. There were twelve palaces to honour the deities at Mount Jingfu Abbey, accompanied by numerous pavilions and palaces throughout the abbey. Of the twelve palaces depicted in Figure 3, eight were Daoist structures while the remaining four were Buddhist structures. As shown in Table 1, the years between 1948 and 1955 witnessed the destruction of almost all of the temples and abbeys, making way for public facilities more necessary for the Bao'an area at that time (Table 1).

Table 1. Development and evolution of Mount Jingfu.

Major Years	Sources	Scale and Organisational Changes
3rd year of Datong era of the Southern Liang Dynasty (529 A.D.)	Monument to Liao Chong at Mount Jingfu of Lianzhou City	Liao Chong lived here.
2nd year of Guangda era of the Southern Chen Dynasty (568 A.D.)	Records of Lianzhou Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness	People worshiped Liao's residence as a Daoist temple. They named the temple "Qingxv" (Liao's courtesy name).
Xiantian and Tianbao eras of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty (712–742)	Chart of the Palaces and Bureaus of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands	Mount Baofu (the old name of Mount Jingfu) was ranked 49th among the Seventy-two Daoist Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands.
Five Dynasties (581–907)	Boundary Separation Experience on Mount Jingfu	Some monks occupied Mount Jingfu.
Five Dynasties (581–907)	Da Qing Yi Tong Zhi (the previous version)	Tianqu Academy where a native named Huang Sun read was built.
Qianxing era of the Song Dynasty (1022)	Da Qing Yi Tong Zhi	Emperor Zhenzong ennobled Liao Chong as the Real Lord of Numinous Support.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Major Years	Sources	Scale and Organisational Changes
1st year of Yuanfeng era of the Song Dynasty (1078)	Records of Lianzhou Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness	Emperor Shenzong ennobled Liao Chong as the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness.
1st year of Longxing era of the Song Dynasty (1163)	Local Chronicles of Guangdong in Qing Dynasty	Emperor Xiaozong granted the title of Abbey of the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness.
3rd year of Baoqing era in the Song Dynasty (1227)	Record of Scenic Spots Across the Country	Mount Jingfu, also known as Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests, is one of the eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River.
2nd year of Duanping era in the Song Dynasty (1235)	Guangzhou Chronicles	The government and citizens raised funds to reconstruct the temples.
7th year of Tianshun era in the Ming Dynasty (1463)		The governor Zhu Yun reconstructed the place.
39th year of Wanli era in the Ming Dynasty (1601)		The place was reconstructed.
7th year of Tianqi era in the Ming Dynasty (1626)		
47th year of Emperor Kangxi in the Qing Dynasty (1708)		The governor Wang Jimin and others advocated for the restoration.
Early years of the Qing Dynasty		The stable spatial layout of 12 palaces.
	Lianzhou Chronicles (in the Tongzhi era)	The scholar Zhang Weiqin discovered and nominated the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu.
7th year of Emperor Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty (1742)		Liao Mulu, Liao Chong's descendants, and others advocated for the restoration.
11th year of Emperor Guangxv in the Qing Dynasty (1806)		Liao Chong's descendants advocated for the restoration.
22nd year of Emperor Guangxv in the Qing Dynasty (1896)		Liao Yuankai, Liao Chong's descendants, and others advocated for the restoration.
28th year of the Republic of China (1939)	Lianzhou County Chronicles	The Guangdong provincial government established a correctional institution at Mount Jingfu.
37th year of the Republic of China (1948)		Buddhist Monk Hall was destroyed and a new platform for Bao'an Village was constructed using demolished brick and wood materials.
1950		The first district government demolished the palaces on Mount Jingfu and used the brick and wood materials to strengthen Bao'an Gospel of Grace Church as its office building.
1951		Bao'an Grain Management Agency demolished the palaces on Mount Jingfu and used brick and wood materials to build a grain storehouse on the west side of the Jielongmen Gate of Wenming Fang.
1955		Bao'an Supply and Marketing Agency demolished the palaces on Mount Jingfu and used brick and wood materials to strengthen the Ouyang's Great Water Shrine and to construct its office building.

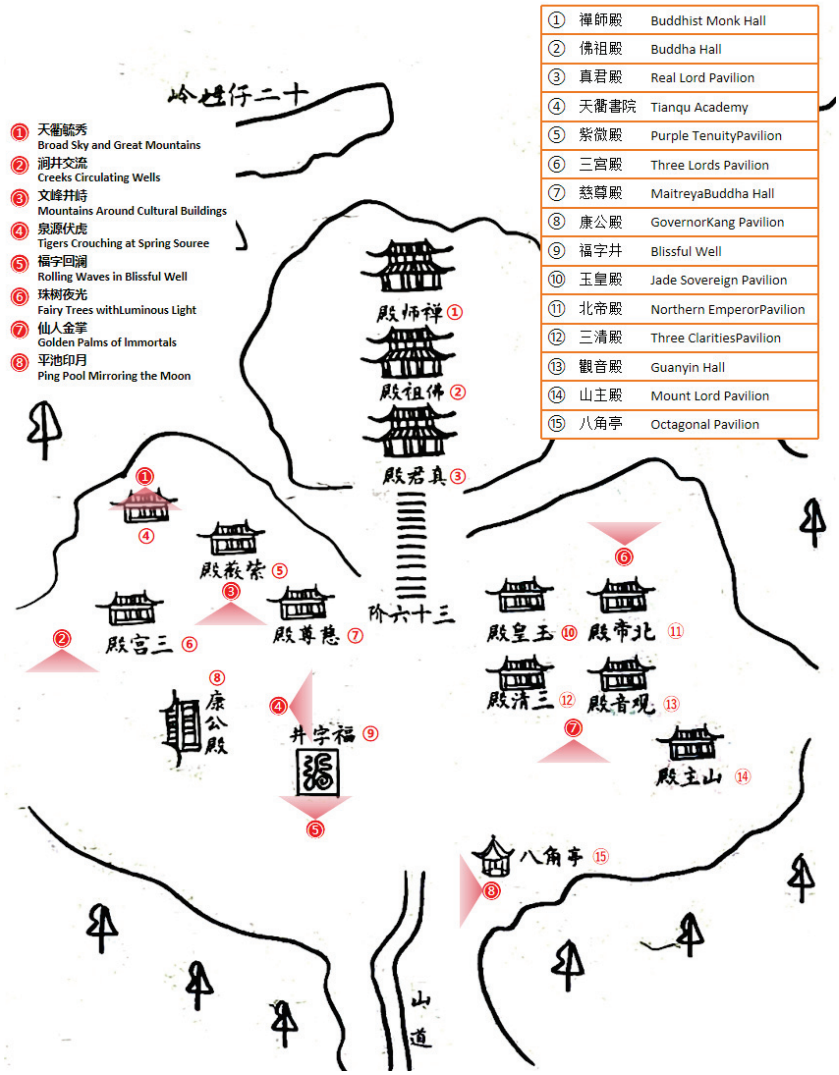

Figure 3. Spatial pattern of Mount Jingfu in the Qing Dynasty.

The Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands of Mount Jingfu represent the culture of diverse beliefs, balancing the fusion and development of natural environmental elements with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, connecting major historical figures and events, and constructing unique spatial scenes, which have influenced the evolution of traditional culture and artistic aesthetics of Mount Jingfu.

5.2. Aesthetics of the Eight Scenes (Bajing, 八景)

As Bajing (八景, eight scenes) culture of the Southern Song Dynasty developed in Lianzhou City, the internal and external eight-scene systems were built centred on Mount Jingfu, namely, the eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River (*huangchuan bajing*, 湟川八景) and the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu (*fushan bajing*, 福山八景). Through naming, commenting, groups of poetry and paintings, the holistic scene of the local iconic landscape system was constructed.

The landscape clusters at Mount Jingfu in Lianzhou City have developed for thousands of years. Their development is not only driven by natural and geographical conditions, but also by the inheritance of traditional culture and the inevitable progress of artistic aesthetics. Bajing culture is a significant aspect of the cultural heritage in the Huangchuan region. The eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River (湟川八景) appreciated and recorded by Zhang Shi (張栻) represent one of the earliest well-known eight scenes in China. The landscape set was firstly described in the *Volume 92 Lianzhou City* of the *Record of Scenic Spots Across the*

Country (輿地紀勝), of which Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests (靜福寒林) is a depiction of Mount Jingfu. As a kind of cultural symbol of landscape set, the eight scenes gradually impacted the development of local culture by cultural radiation and diffusion. After Zhang Jun and his son Zhang Shi left Lianzhou City, their supporters arrived successively, composing poems and chants, which resulted in the creation of eight subsequent scenes in specific places. Among them, the most representative eight subsequent scenes were derived from the Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests (靜福寒林), one of the eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River. The eight scenes at Mount Jingfu were the landscape set discovered and nominated by the scholar Zhang Weiqin in the third year of the Daoguang era in the Qing Dynasty (1823 A.D.). His marvellous discovery, along with the poetry on these scenic spots made Bajing Culture, resonated with the folk of Lianzhou City, promoting the creation of six rural eight scenes and two mountainous eight scenes (Figure 4).

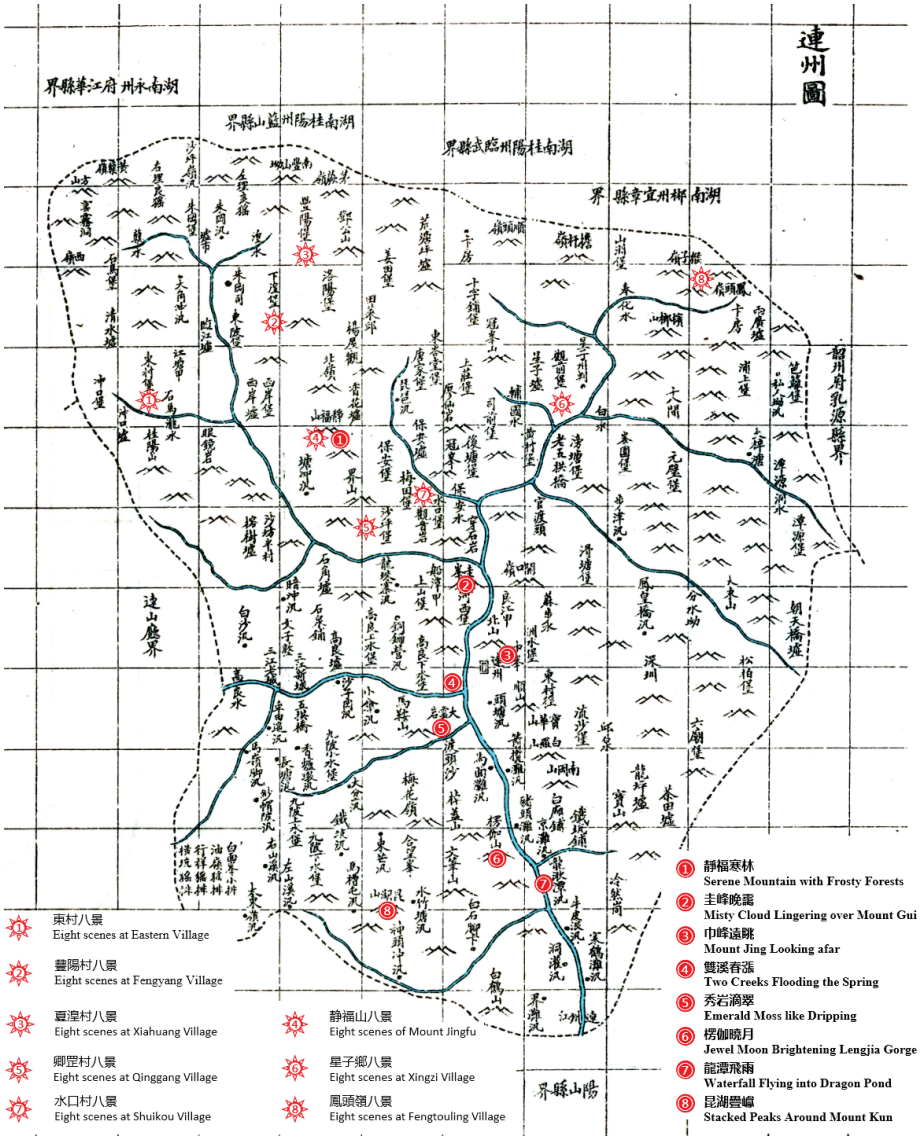

Figure 4. Eight Scenes along the Huangchuan River and its eight child scenes.

By designing viewing platforms from various viewpoints, the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu create a spatial organisation of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, which highlights the scenery outside and conveys the sacredness inside. This further enhances the contribution of Mount Jingfu to the overall landscape composition at a larger scale. The scene of Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests was one of the eight ancient scenes alongside Huangchuan

River, from which the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu were derived. This scene together with the other seven scenes builds the typical landscape space of Lianzhou City (Figure 5). The eight original scenes and the eight subsequent scenes interconnect each other internally and externally, enlarging the scope and heightening the realm of the small-scale landscape of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands (Yang et al. 2022).

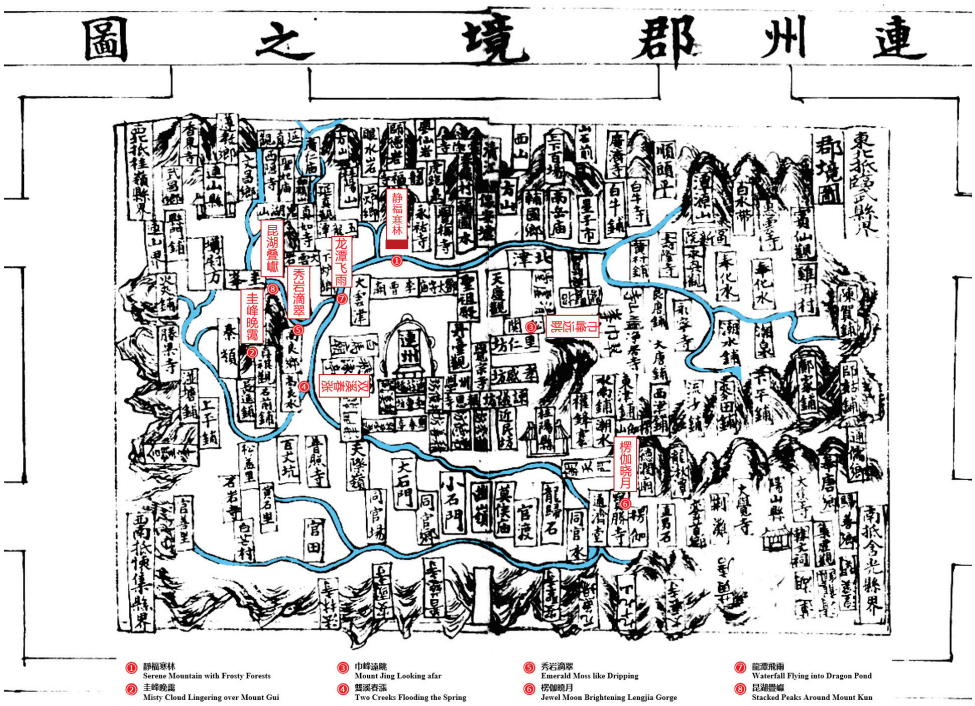

Figure 5. Distribution map of eight scenes along the Huangchuan River.

The poetry on the eight subsequent scenes depicts the internal landscape of Mount Jingfu, which accurately reproduces the scenery of Mount Jingfu encompassed by water during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The eight scenes are integrated in an orderly manner and thematically linked into a series of echoing scenes through the presentation of traditional poems and commentaries (Du and Wang 2014). During the Ming and Qing dynasties, many literati journeyed to Mount Jingfu and Lianzhou City, creating an extensive collection of poems. The poems on Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests and the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu appreciate the spatial layout and scenic qualities while extracting the significance of the landscapes. This represents the comprehensive features of the landscape complex centred on Mount Jingfu. Through analysis of the extant poems related to the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu, it becomes apparent that their focus primarily lies on natural and humanistic landscape elements. The depiction of natural elements such as animals, plants, weather, waterscape, mountains and rocks conveys the connection and harmony between the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands of Mount Jingfu and nature (Table 2). In particular, the portrayal of plants and landscapes highlights the diversity of the natural environment of Mount Jingfu. On the one hand, the botanical elements present in the poems not only document the environment, but also represent the ecological foundation upon which the landscape is built. On the other hand, the combination of hills and water signifies the aesthetic pleasure of ancient people as a result of their intricate observation of the springs, pools, and waterways of Mount Jingfu. The humanistic landscape elements are dominated by architecture. Daoist rites, figures and connections with the celestial realm are combined with architectural features to create a sacred atmosphere of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands. As a significant cultural symbol and spatial and temporal reference, the buildings interact with the scenery of the day and the four seasons, reflecting rich landscape structural connections between them and the aesthetic needs of the aesthetic subjects.

Table 2. Landscape aesthetic elements in poems on eight scenes at Mount Jingfu.

Landscape Elements	Architectural	Mountain	Botanical	Animal	Religious	Astronomical	Cultural	Legendary
Rolling Waves in Blissful Well	pavilion	Stone\clear stream	——	——	Xiyi	——	float wine cups\character "Fu"\Shangsi festival	grindstone
Ping Pool Mirroring the Moon	——	ping pool\ fragrant pond\ clear waves\blue waves	pondweed	——	——	Moon\bright moon\cold moon	——	——
Creeks Circulating Wells	funnelled device\ square well	unusual stone\ mountain spring	dappled moss	——	secluded place	cold wind	——	——
Tigers Crouching at Spring Source	——	Spring\stream\ cliffs\valley	osmanthus flowers	tiger	crimson tripod\lord of the mountain	——	tamed and subdued the tiger	the rise of chickens and dogs
Golden Palms of Immortals	——	——	purple peonies\ wild grass	——	Immortals\ sacred altar	Clouds\dawn\ dew\rain\ gleaming light	——	golden palms\ Penglai
Broad Sky and Great Mountains	Tianqu academy	green mountains\ fragrant stream	locust trees\ cassia trees	Swallows\cicadas	high immortals	purple wind	——	——
Mountains Around Cultural Buildings	——	Mountains\twin peaks\stones\river	green moss	——	Taoist bell\blessed land	Clouds\blue sky\ morning rays	chant poet	——
Fairy Trees with Luminous Light	——	——	fairy trees\ fair\cassia blooms\fragrant blossoms\ camphor tree	night magpie\fireflies	——	luminous light\ brightly moon\ sparse stars\ wind	——	blessed land

In summary, the poems on the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu emphasise the depiction of natural landscapes, combined with the imagination of immortals and references to historical stories, which underline the sacred ambience of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands (Figure 6). The eight internal scenes initially set the tone for their original scene of Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests, which is characterised by serenity and coldness. The poems on the eight original scenes traditionally portray natural, humanistic, and imaginative landscapes. These descriptions emphasise the scenery's lofty and frigid nature, which, when combined with the imagination and analogy of the celestial realm, creates the sacred atmosphere of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands. The commentaries on the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu transcend depicting the interior of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands from a distinct perspective. Rather, they create an aesthetic correlation between the picturesque surroundings and the sacred connotation inside for the landscape set.

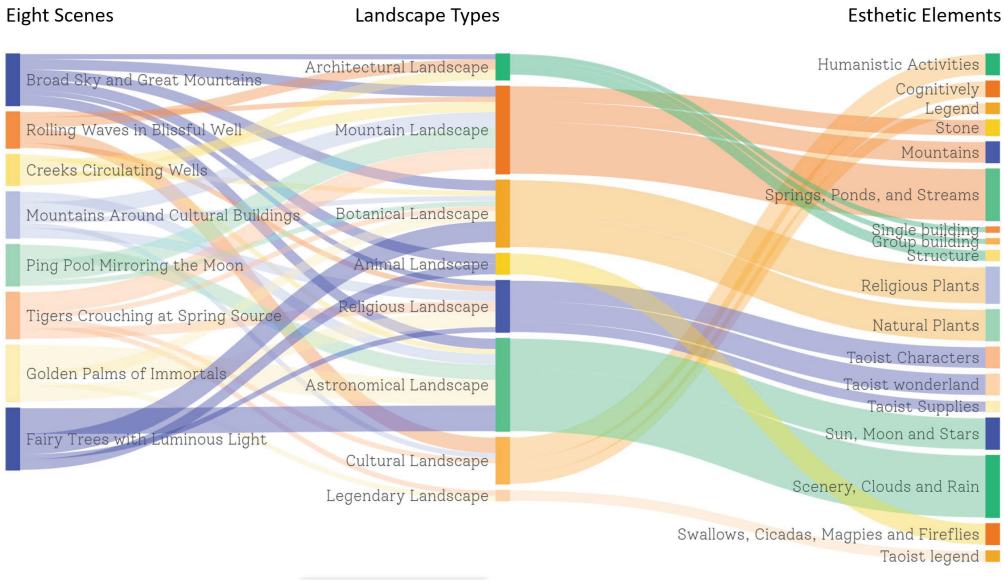

Figure 6. Landscape representation in poems on eight scenes at Mount Jingfu.

6. Aesthetics of Ritual Activities

With changes in ideology during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the rituals on Mount Jingfu centred on the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands were influenced by folklore and moved into the living spaces associated with daily life. The Daoist ritual activities combined with the folk god pageant ceremony (*youshen and saihui*, 遊神賽會) in Lingnan District have given rise to the Bao'an Great God Parade held during the Double Ninth Festival (保安重陽大神會)[3]. This event enhances the social aesthetic representations of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands with a figurative narrative focusing on blood, geography, and divinity.

6.1. Bloodline Identity Represented by Religious Rites

The essential representation of religious belief systems serves to maintain community stability and manifest communal values (Durkheim 1925). The Bao'an Great God Parade (保安大神) has developed from unique beliefs due to a long-standing settlement within a single-surname clan. The rituals organised under these beliefs highlight the inherent blood ties within the clan, which further reflects the importance of sharing the same family name and clan for the stable inheritance of the parade. The Bao'an Great God Parade is primarily organised and participated in by people residing in the six major villages of this town whose shared blood ties create a clan-based identity.

The Bao'an Great God Parade held during the Double Ninth Festival is the largest god pageant ceremony in northwestern Guangdong. It comprises two major activities: youshen (遊神) and saihui (賽會), which mean parading the deities and a competition of miscellaneous

arts, respectively. The event was initially arranged to honor Liao Chong, a Daoist priest who introduced self-cultivation practices at Mount Jingfu. As per the Lianzhou Chronicles from the ninth year of the Tongzhi era of the Qing Dynasty (1871 A.D.), Liao ascended in flight in the second year of the Guangda era of the Southern Chen Dynasty (568 A.D.) at Mount Jingfu. Since then, every year during the Double Ninth Festival, the Liao's ethnic group would parade the statue of their ancestor Liao Chong in the mountain. After the Song Dynasty, more and more outsiders who settled at Bao'an Town participated in the parade, leading to a gradual increase in the number of great gods (*dashen*, 大神). This then led to the enrichment and diversification of the forms and contents. With the growing participation, a festival was formed that has been preserved and passed down from generation to generation. People invite the idols out of their temples onto a carrier, and travel around the region. Along the way, gongs are sounded, drums are beat, and various entertainment programs are performed to honor the gods, entertain people, and ward off disasters while bringing blessings.

The god pageant ceremony is an event organised by civil society itself. The Bao'an Great God Parade involves the Great God (*dashen*, 大神)[4] as the dominant deity and the High Gods (*gaoshen*, 高神, local ancient sages)[5] as secondary gods. There are six villages in Bao'an Town, including Wenming Fang (文明坊), Yuxiu Fang (毓秀坊), Dongxing Fang (東興坊), Wanquan Fang (萬全坊), Xiangui Fang (仙桂坊) and Taiping Fang (太平坊). The community has agreed that the first four villages carry the Great God on a rotational basis and the other two primarily travel the High Gods and occasionally carry the Great God. Before the establishment of the Republic of China, Wanquan Fang had strong financial resources and hosted the ceremony actively once every two years, while the other three villages rotated once every few years, and after the resumption of the activity in 1985, the Great God Parade was held by the four major villages once a year (refer to Table 3 for details). The familial connections embedded within the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands of Mount Jingfu correspond to the divine systems of high gods in the organisation of activities. Every village in Bao'an Town possesses its individual high god, and nearly all of the high gods are local ancient sages. As per Feuchtwang, local gods represent the essence of folk morality (Feuchtwang 2021). For the purpose of sacred formation, the Bao'an villages associated their earthly aspirations with the belief in high deities through the legends of divine manifestations. By performing regular rituals, they established a stable and blessed relationship between the village and the exclusive high god, forging an important bond to unify the bloodline identity.

Table 3. Village rotation year for Great God and High Gods Parade Ceremony.

a Village Rotation Year during the Republic of China			**b Village Rotation Year after 1985**		
Year	Rotation Village	High God	Year	Rotation Village	High God
1940	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu	1985	Yuxiu Fang	General Bai
1941	Dongxing Fang	Lord Wang	1986	Dongxing Fang	Lord Wang
1942	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu	1987	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu
1943	Wenming Fang	Grand Guardian Cai	1988	Wenming Fang	Grand Guardian Cai
1944	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu	1989	Yuxiu Fang	General Bai
1945	Yuxiu Fang	General Bai	1990	Dongxing Fang	Lord Wang
1946	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu	1991	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu
1947	Dongxing Fang	Lord Wang	1992	Wenming Fang	Grand Guardian Cai
1948	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu	1993	Yuxiu Fang	General Bai
1949	Wenming Fang	Grand Guardian Cai			

Bao'an Town comprises several villages of different clans around Mount Jingfu, united by a core belief in the Great God, as well as the bloodlines of individual clan villages with different beliefs in high gods. The cultural landscape of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands has evolved from a small-scale clan space to a larger geographical space, sustained and represented by communal rituals.

6.2. Geo-Spatial Identity Represented by High Gods Parade

The geospatial identity of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands of Mount Jingfu is upheld through high god offerings conducted by all villages. Local traditional deities and sages' beliefs are integrated into the landscape in an enlightened way, transforming the clan settlement's family-based relations into territorial deity worship. The set route of the high gods' procession serves as an annual symbolical validation of the spatial boundaries of divine blessing, while the rituals establish the local community's identity spanning from the bloodline clan to the geographical settlement.

In the legends of high gods that have been transmitted through generations in Bao'an Town, the factual mountain scenery, historical events, and the revered immortals and sages authenticate each other, linking the landscape, the beliefs, and the settlements in this area. With the god pageant ceremony co-organised by all villages, the high gods originated from their ancient sages' stories were included in the parade to symbolise each village's participation and establish interactive relationships between villages and high gods. This creates a stable fusion of ritual and regional space, forming the entire imaginary world and marking the ritual space as locally recognised.

Every year, the Bao'an Great God Parade is held from the seventh to the tenth day of the ninth month on the Chinese Lunar Calendar. On the second day of the event, at around 3:00 p.m., the procession is led by the village councillors to carry the statues of high gods in a specific order. At the beginning of each village team, two individuals ignite firecrackers, followed by others who carry colourful gates, flags, village sign, incense holder, eight percussion instruments (*bayin*, 八音) and the High God. Additional teams include performers of dragon dance, storytelling (*gushi*, 故事隊)[6], lion dance, and ten varieties of gongs and drums (*shiyang jin luogu*, 十樣錦鑼鼓)[7], as well as stilt walkers (Figure 7). The High God Parade teams tour the villages following a fixed route in close succession. As the procession passes, each household greets the high gods at the gate and greets the ceremony of "swinging the gods" (*yaoshen*, 搖神)[8], offering gifts in reverence. The shared street space between adjacent neighbourhoods serves as a buffer zone between public ceremonies and private domains, and the ritualistic practices conducted in this area contribute to enhancing neighbourhood cohesion (Wang et al. 2022) (Figure 8). According to the villagers' beliefs, the parade represents the deities' assessment of their daily lives and serves as a means for the deities to visit the earth and bestow blessings on the townships. In addition, the parade route represents the spatial extent of these blessings.

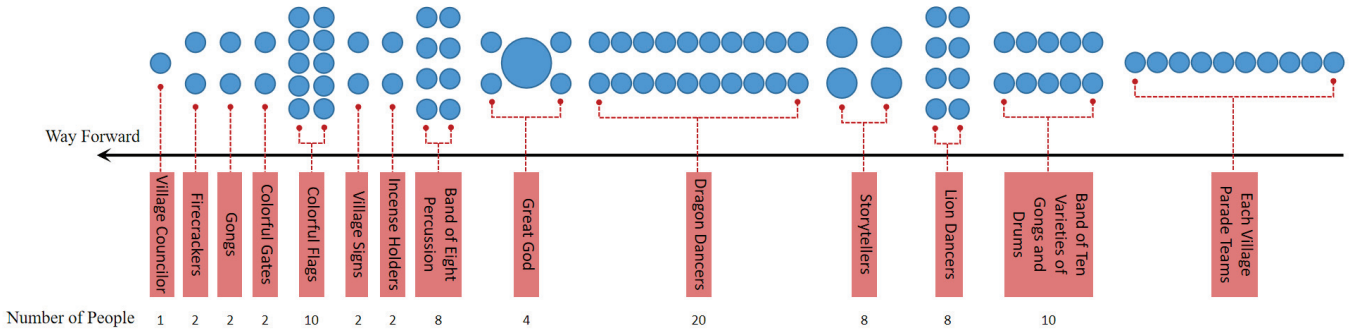

Figure 7. High Gods Parade procession and people involved.

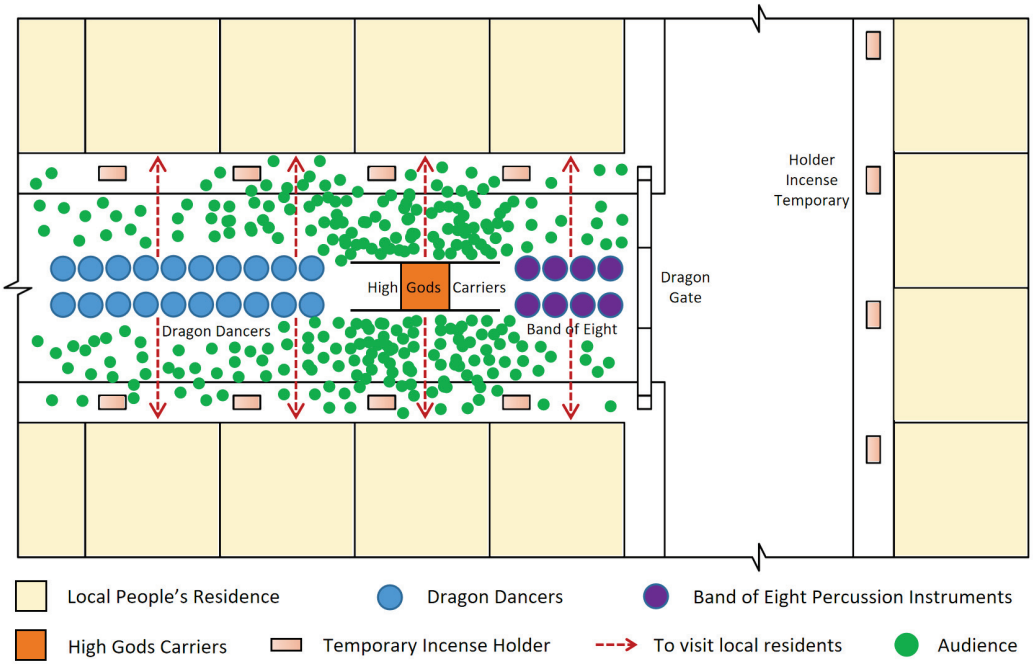

Figure 8. Spatial organisation illustration of alleys in High Gods Swinging Ceremony.

The parade team starts at the Jielongmen Gate (接龍門) of Wenming Fang located on Northern Bao'an Street, proceeding towards Yaoshen Square (搖神坪) in Wanquan Fang. The route then winds upwards towards Huguang Street and continues onto Bao'an New Street, Xinxv Square (新墟坪), and Jieshenmen Gate (接神門) of Wenming Fang before descending via Yuxiu Fang and Dongxing Fang. The team then rests in Yaoshen Square of Wanquan Fang for approximately thirty minutes. Then, the procession is led by the rotating village team, followed by the team from the previous year's rotating village and other village teams. It proceeds from Yaoshen Square to Xinxv Square, then to Jielongmen Gate. Finally, the teams from different villages go back to their respective ceremonial sites.

The High God Parade route consists of several critical spatial nodes on a designated path that connects Bao'an Town and the natural landscape of Mount Jingfu through a specific time and space for scenic events. The ceremony will feature several activities in various places, with these spatial locations being both functional and symbolic, which can facilitate ceremonial events while representing significant importance (Jones 2016). The god pageant ceremony, as a local public event, serves not only as an annual commemoration but also as a means for social education in everyday life, linking the public interaction space with the nodes along the parade route. Mount Jingfu and Bao'an Town's divine squares, village gates, streets and alleys function as exhibition sites for local annual rituals, which constantly reinforce the believers' understanding of the spiritual space, residential space and natural environments. Through the creation of ritual scenes, the ceremony serves as a cultural emblem of collective consciousness that connects the daily living space of local people and represents the geospatial identity from long-term settlement.

6.3. Divine Identity Represented by Great God Parade

In traditional Chinese communities, there is always a common belief in a master deity, whose worshipping ritual functions as a key representation that motivates local residents to form a social community and advances its unity (Dean and Zheng 1992). The Bao'an Great God Parade originally honours Liao Chong, the Taoism founder at Mount Jingfu. However, based on the rituals and the needs of the public, the ritual space of Mount Jingfu has subsequently formed an alliance among territorial units in the area influenced by a shared main god through divine connection, extending the reach of the shared belief space (Zheng and Chen 2003).

The rituals of the deities are realised through the Great God Parade, in which the living space of clan settlements merges with the space of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, achieving spatial integration. The annual parade ceremony and religious practices have endowed the local environment with a sense of sanctity and represented the boundaries of the ritual space on Mount Jingfu and the areas blessed by the deities. These customs have enhanced the residents' recognition of the belief space of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands at Mount Jingfu through the divine ties.

Every year on the Chinese Double Ninth Festival, at around 6 a.m., the rotating village organises the procession to bring the clothing and crowns of the Great God, Judges and Servants to the Real Lord Abbey at Mount Jingfu to invite the statues of the deities while carrying colourful gates, flags, incense holders and performing eight percussion instruments. When the god figures are dressed up, the cannons boom three times and the firecrackers are set off. In the front of the procession, two people play gongs, followed by those carrying colourful gates, flags and the statue of the Lord of Mount Hua (*xiyue chuanzhu*, 西嶽川主) and the honor guard. Then follows the carrier for the Great God, people holding yellow damask umbrellas and a man carrying two gongs. The Judges and Servants stand on the left and right side of the carrier, respectively, stopping every three steps to look back at the Great God. A team of old men walks slowly with incense pillars in their hands and deacon plates on their shoulders, followed by the dragon and lion dancers, along the road from Mount Jingfu to Bao'an Street (Figure 9). The processions from other villages greet the Great God at Gaoshen Square at the Jielongmen Gate. Everywhere the whole procession arrives, the neighborhoods greet them excitedly, burning incense and setting off firecrackers. At around 11 a.m., the procession arrives at Yaoshen Square of Wanquan Fang and puts down the carrier, making the Great God face north. And the Judges perform the ritual of Treading on the Eight Diagrams (*cai bagua*, 踩八卦)[9] to pray and offer sacrifices (Figure 10).

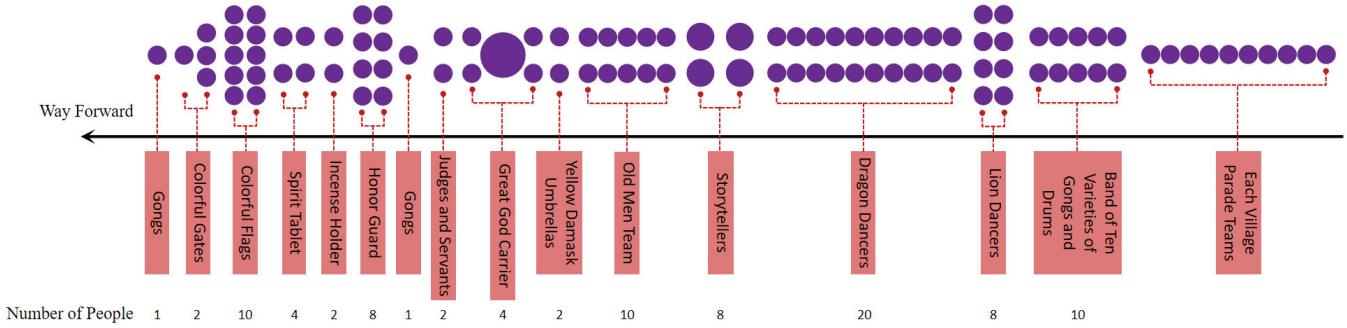

Figure 9. Great God Parade procession and people involved.

The climax of the god pageant ceremony is at 3 p.m., when the processions, following the order of activities on the afternoon of the eighth day, march down the street from the Jielongmen Gate of Wenming Fang and gather at Yaoshen Square for the second round of Treading on the Eight Diagrams. After that, the rotating village takes first place in the procession and the rotating village of the previous year takes second place, followed by other villages, marching up the street from Yaoshen Square of Wanquan Fang and resting at Gaoshen Square of Wenming Fang via Xinwei Square. Meanwhile, the High Gods are swung several times in front of each village's archway.

The rotating village team places the Great God on the crossroad at the mouth of Mount Jingfu, unveils the first mask of kindness and harmony, and shows the second mask with a green face and fangs. Then, comes the third round of the Great God going down the streets, when the non-rotating villages place the statues of landlords and gods in the middle of the streets to block the Great God, which is called collecting the blessing of the Great God (*tun dashen*, 囤大神). After this ceremony, the procession descends to Yaoshen Square in Wanquan Fang, stopping every three steps along the way and lowering

the Great God Carrier from south to north. The parade of high gods, storytelling, dragon and lion dances ends here, while the Judges conduct the third round of Treading on the Eight Diagrams. At around 7 or 8 p.m., the Double Ninth Great God Parade ends, and the rotating village carries the Great God back to its own village, while the other villages return with their own High Gods. On the morning of the tenth day, the villages send off their guests with dragon and lion dances in the streets, and this is the end of the god pageant ceremony of Bao'an Town.

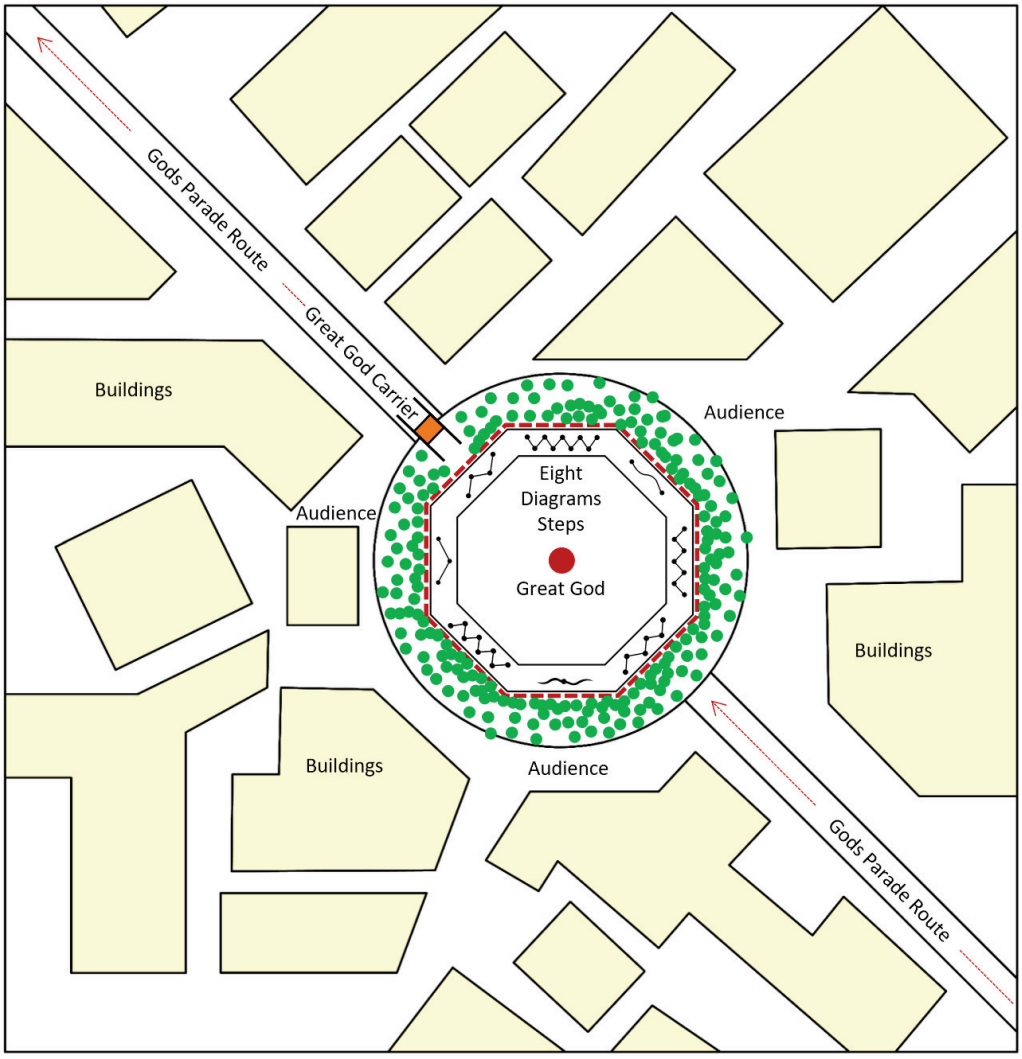

Figure 10. Spatial organisation illustration of Treading on the Eight Diagrams Ceremony.

The Bao'an Great God Parade involves a set of procedural and symbolic rituals, like activities traveling along the villages with performances in specific spaces to worship the deities. The parade is not confined to the palatial space of Mount Jingfu but has instead expanded to the entire Bao'an Town, with all villages joining together. It is an event that unites individuals, villages, settlements, and Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands based on shared beliefs, symbolising collective identity. The Great God Parade incorporates local clan connotations into religious practices, establishing a framework of activities based on familial ties. The ritual space of communities where multiple family names have long resided fosters geopolitical ties and legends of divine manifestations creates an exclusive divine identity for each village. The interplay of familial, geographical, and divine connections plays a crucial role in the ongoing transmission of the Bao'an Great God Parade and the preservation of the social vibrancy of Mount Jingfu's Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands as a cultural landscape (see Table 4).

Table 4. Social representation of Bao'an Great God Parade during the Double Ninth Festival.

Type	Content
Familial Representation	• Rotation villages: Wanquan Fang, Dongxing Fang, Yuxiu Fang, Wenming Fang; • High Gods: local sages like Cai Qiji, Meng Binyu, Liao Jiu, Liao Yong, Aunt Liao, General Bai and so on; • Great God: Liao Chong, a local sage at Bao'an Town.
Geographic Representation	• Parade space: abbeys at Mount Jingfu, Bao'an River, farmlands, alleys, ancestry halls, village gates, the palace of Great God and divine squares; • Ceremony procession: village councillor—people igniting firecrackers—people playing gongs—people carrying colourful gates—people carrying flags—people carrying incense holders—a band playing eight percussion instruments—people carrying the Great God—dragon dancers—storytellers—lion dancers—a band of ten varieties of gongs and drums—stilt walkers—teams of each village; • Route for High Gods Parade: Northern Bao'an Street—Jielongmen Gate of Wenming Fang—Yaoshen Square in Wanquan Fang—Huguang Street—Bao'an New Street—Xinxv Square—Jieshenmen Gate of Wenming Fang.
Divine Representation	• Parade space: Mount Jingfu, Jielong Square, Gaoshen Alley, squares in the front of each village gate; • Ceremony procession: people playing gongs—people carrying colourful gates—people carrying colourful flags—people carrying Spirit Tablet—people carrying incense holders—a honor guard—people playing gongs—Judges and Servants—Great God carrier—people holding yellow damask umbrellas—old men team- dragon dancers—lion dancers—a band of ten varieties of gongs and drums—each village parade team; • Route for Great God parade: Mount Jingfu—the crossroad at the mouth of Mount Jingfu—Xinwei Square—Wenming Fang—Jielong Square—Yuxiu Fang—Dongxing Fang—village gate of Wanquan Fang—Yaoshen Square.

7. Conclusions

Based on the superior mountainous resources of Lianzhou City, Mount Jingfu was constructed around the ideal environment of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands in people's mind. Furthermore, it incorporated sacred yet systematic archetypes of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands and created an ideal spatial pattern of Mount Jingfu, which has been recognised by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism over the ages. Through the promotion by literati and the construction of landscape sets, the landscape clusters of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands at Mount Jingfu, which connects the picturesque surroundings and the sacred connotation inside, have had a profound impact on constructing sacred space in Lianzhou City and Bao'an Town. During the Song Dynasty, Liao Chong became the official deity sanctioned by the state. In later Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Great God belief of Bao'an Town was accompanied by additional local sages. This represents that the veneration of True Lords, as dictated by the state, surpasses the limited spatial layout of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands and encompasses the communal identity of those who congregate with regard to geography, family and divinity. During ceremonial events, genetic ties amongst people sharing the same surname or clan structure serve as the organisational blueprint and unify clan identity. The long-term settlement's geographical relationship holds the physical space of the activities while the High Gods parade sequences mountains and water bodies. The shared belief in the divine illuminates the significance of the practices, expressing thanks to deities and providing amusement to the public while unifying the local identity. These interconnected aspects motivate the ongoing development and preservation of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands at Mount Jingfu as a living legacy of cultural landscapes.

As a primary form of cultural landscapes, Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands document local history and represent the aesthetics of the landscape, playing a crucial role in a specific cultural domain and social progression. The Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands at Mount Jingfu have preserved traditional Chinese cultural elements while integrating complex socio-cultural factors within a specific natural and historical framework. It represents aesthetic beliefs and collective consciousness internalised within the familial, geospatial, and spiritual identity of a social group and has become crucial to integrate cultural groups within a definite spatial–temporal framework to explore their social aesthetics. From the view of cultural landscape, exploring the interaction between natural geography's

environmental force and human society's cultural force in the development of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands can help highlight the common genetic characteristics and regional individuality shaped in its landscape aesthetic system.

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Notes

1 Eight Scenes Alongside Huangchuan River: The mother river of Lianzhou City is Lianjiang River, which was known as Huangshui in ancient times, and the entire water basin was called Huangchuan River. Therefore, the eight scenes of Lianzhou City are also known as the eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River. *Record of Scenic Spots Across the Country* (*yudi jisheng*, 舆地纪胜 (Wang 2005) and *Fang Yu Sheng Lan* (方舆胜览) are two comprehensive geographic books of great significance, compiled during the Southern Song Dynasty. These texts specifically document two sets of landscapes, known as the "Eight Views of Xiaoxiang" and the "Eight Scenes Alongside Huangchuan River". The latter consists of Mount Jing Looking afar (巾峰远眺), Misty Cloud Lingering over Mount Gui (圭峰晚霭), Emerald Moss like Dripping Aurora (秀岩滴翠), Two Creeks Flooding the Spring (双溪春涨), Jewel Moon Brightening Lengjia Gorge (楞伽晓月), Waterfall Flying into Dragon Pond (龙潭飞雨), Stacked Peaks Around Mount Kun (昆湖叠巘) and Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests (静福寒林).

2 Eight Scenes at Mount Jingfu: Zhang Weiqin is a scholar of the Daoguang era in the Qing Dynasty. He firstly discovered and nominated the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu.
Rolling Waves in Blissful Well (福字回澜) (created by Weiqin ZHANG—Qing Dynasty)
There's a pavilion covered like a cap, there's a stone flat as a grindstone (有亭覆如蓋，有石平如砥)
The character "Fu" is patterned after Xiyi, who might have carved it here back then? (福字摹希夷，當年誰勒此?)
Wandering leisurely like a gentle wave, trickling endlessly around the clear stream (宛轉約回瀾，涓涓繞清泚)
Desiring to float wine cups down a winding stream, the joyful date is already set in Shangsi Festival (欲泛羽觴流，佳期約上巳)
Ping Pool Mirroring the Moon (平池印月 (created by Weiqin ZHANG—Qing Dynasty))
The fragrant pond stores clear waves, bright and quiet from delicate dust (芳池蓄清波，皦皦纖塵靜)
The bright moon graces the sky, blue waves immerse the treasure mirror (皓月麗中天，碧波沉寶鏡)
The pondweed interweaves, the clear light reflects each other (荇藻自交横，清光互輝映)
On a fine night embracing the cold moon, leisurely, I see my nature (良夜抱寒暉，悠然見吾性)
Creeks Circulating Wells (涧井交流) (created by Weiqin ZHANG—Qing Dynasty)
The divine mechanics of the universe, shape an unusual stone into a funnelled device (造化運神機，奇石辟為筧)
The mountain spring gushes forth, the square well contains the clear shallows (山泉汩汩來，方井涵清淺)
In this secluded place, worldly dust is scarce, dappled moss paints a colourful scene (境僻俗塵稀，斕班暈苔蘚)
Cherishing this isolated spot, a cold goodness arises when the wind blows past (愛此獨遲留，風過冷然善)
Tigers Crouching at Spring Source (泉源伏虎) (created by Weiqin ZHANG—Qing Dynasty)
A spring opens up with the pace of a tiger, a crimson tripod gathers the osmanthus flowers (泉逐虎蹄開，丹鼎黃芽簇)
Flowing since ancient times, the lord of the mountain tamed and subdued here (終古流潺湲，山君此馴伏)
Not following the rise of chickens and dogs, always resting at the source of the spring (不隨雞犬升，長踞泉源宿)
There will be a moment to leap over layers of cliffs, a single laugh generates breeze in the valley (會當躍層崖，一笑風生穀)
Golden Palms of Immortals (仙人金掌) (created by Bo ZHANG—Qing Dynasty)
Beyond the wilderness clouds of three autumns, twice-drenched condensed into crimson hues (三秋野雲外，兩潤凝丹彩)
Tangerine dawn wields the dew's shadow, as purple peonies urge orchids to bloom (橙霞揮露影，紫芍催蘭開)
Golden palm absorbs the fine essence, jade-like brilliance seals the sacred altar (金掌收氤氣，鎏玉鎮聖臺)
Once again, dark greens merge with wild grass, the gleaming light seems like fairyland Penglai (蒼蔷複菅莽，瑤光似蓬萊)
Broad Sky and Great Mountains (天衢毓秀) (created by Bo ZHANG—Qing Dynasty)
In front of the jade green mountains and purple wind, beside the fragrant stream with colourful blossoms (翠微紫風前，椎華香澗邊)

Locust branches hold thousands of dews, Cassia trees reach up to the ninth heaven (槐枝承千露，桂木舉九天)
Swallows cut the clouds brightly, cicadas sing lying low on the hot hill (剪燕繞雲亮，唱蟬伏丘炎)
Over the long wilderness, mountain smoke rises, climbing the path to greet the high immortals (長野山煙起，攀徑謁高仙)
Mountains Around Cultural Buildings (文峰并峙) (created by Bo ZHANG—Qing Dynasty),
Twin peaks rise abruptly in the south, they stand soaring and leaning in the long empty sky (雙峰聳南起，飛倚長空立)
Deep clouds push against the blue sky, and shallow stones wear green moss (雲深推藍影，石淺披青衣)
As the poet's chant reaches the edge of the forest, the Taoist bell echoes back from the west of the river (詩吟出林際，道鐘回河西)
Shoulder-to-shoulder, we gaze at this blessed land, waiting for the first rays of the autumn morning (並肩仰福地，秋晨待先曦)
Fairy Trees with Luminous Light (珠树夜光) (created by Bo ZHANG—Qing Dynasty).
The fair leaves sway casting silhouettes, the night magpie returns kicking up dust (嘉葉搖暗影，夜鵲撲塵歸)
The moon shines brightly with sparse stars accompanying, in the gentle wind, fireflies fly (月明稀星伴，風柔眾螢飛)
Cassia blooms hide in the smoke cage, the tall camphor tree hangs jade shells (桂舒掩煙籠，樟挺懸玉貝)
Summer sentiments weave into dreams, in this blessed land, we search for fragrant blossoms (夏情牽入夢，福瀛覓芳菲)

[3] Bao'an Great God Parade held during the Double Ninth Festival is also called the god pageant ceremony which is a custom based on local Chinese popular exorcistic religion to honor the gods and ward off disasters while bringing blessings in Bao'an Town. As per Buddhist Classics and Topography of Mount Hengshan (*nanyue zongsheng ji*, 南岳总胜集), the original prototype to be worshipped was Real Lord Liao Chong who was venerated by the local people. Over time, the ceremony evolved and was inherited, eventually transforming into a customary event for commemorating ancestors, seeking good fortune, and preventing disasters. It also serves as a means for the community to gather with their relatives and friends.

[4] The Great God refers to Shaohao, also known as Jin Tian (金天), who is the Lord of Mount Hua (*xiyue chuanzhu*, 西岳川主). In the Bao'an Great God Parade, one of the local elders will be chosen to act as the Great God who sits on a dragon-shaped chair wearing a mask with a serene expression, a dragon robe, and a divine umbrella over the head. Each village takes turns playing the role of the Great God annually.

[5] High Gods are locally known as Gao Gong (高公), and in ancient times, there were 72 Gao deities, such as Liao Chong, Meng Binyu, Cai Qiji, General Bai and Aunt Liao.

[6] Storytellers (*gushi*, 故事) are played by children dressed in little dragon robes and official hats, mainly modelled after the Beijing Opera and Qi Opera plays. These performances often feature classic plays such as The Oath of Brotherhood in the Peach Garden, Legend of the White Snake and Wu Song Fighting a Tiger.

[7] Ten varieties of gongs and drums make up a form of folk music consisting of blowing and beating, popular in the Xingzi language area of Lianzhou City. The instruments comprise the high-side gong, small gong, hard gong, high-side drum, flat drum, Mandong drum, wooden fish, medium cymbal, small cymbal, and suona. Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, this type of folk music was exclusively performed during the god pageant ceremony.

[8] Shaking the Gods is a ceremony in which people wearing masks stand on the deity carriers and act as the Great God and High Gods who are raised high by eight men. When they reach a house, the audience shouted "swing the gods". They respond by swinging the gods from side to side, and it seems that the actors are dancing like fairies with long sleeves.

[9] Treading on the Eight Diagrams is a dance of Daoist origin in which the dancers perform in the Eight Diagrams steps.

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Hmong Spirituality, Nature, and Place

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Abstract: In this article, I show how the Hmong religion can provide the basis of a novel version of non-human-centered environmentalism. I do this by outlining some of the core doctrines in the Hmong religion and showing what they imply about the value of nature. I then situate the view that is implied by these doctrines into the traditional Western environmental ethics literature on the value of nature. In particular, I argue that the Hmong religion provides a view in environmental ethics that is non-anthropocentric, individualistic, non-egalitarian, and non-biocentric.

Keywords: Hmong worldview; environmental ethics; spirituality; nature; place

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1. Introduction

Religion has a profound impact on a group's social structure, status hierarchy, and understanding of the world. The Hmong religion is animistic, i.e., it is characterized by the belief that divinity resides in all objects in nature (Desantiago 2017). The Hmong are an ethnic group of people who originally came from China. With a history spanning over 4000 years, they have a unique culture and language. The Hmong are believed to have a history of migration, particularly in the mid-19th century, when they moved southwards from the southern provinces of China. This migration was likely due to violent conflicts with the Chinese authorities (Cooper 1998). Today, Hmong people mainly live in southern China (e.g., Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan, Chongqing, and Guangxi); Vietnam; Laos; Thailand; and Myanmar.

The Hmong language is also known as "Hmong" and is one of the Hmong-Mien languages (also known as Miao-Yao languages) (Tapp 2003) Hmong is a monosyllabic tonal language. Because there is no Hmong written script, for a long time, the Hmong maintained a purely oral culture. This has made their culture and stories difficult to record.

There is no Hmong nation or state. In China, Hmong people are called Miao people, the term "Miao" gaining official status in 1949 as a minzu (ethnic group) encompassing a group of linguistically related ethnic minorities in Southwest China. In Southeast Asian context, words derived from the Chinese "Miao" took on a sense that was perceived as derogatory by the subgroups living in that region. For example, Vietnamese: Mèo or H'Mông, Thai: แม้ว (Maew) or ม้ง (Mong), Burmese: mun lu-myo. "Mèo", or variants thereof are considered highly derogatory by many Hmong/Mong people and are infrequently used today outside of Southeast Asia (Lee and Tapp 2010). For this reason, I will not use Miao to refer to the ethnic group. Rather, I will use the more general term "Hmong".

The Hmong have been members of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) since 2007. In China, they are classified as a subgroup of the Miao people. There are many interesting thoughts and views among Hmong culture and ethics. For example, they believe that everything is alive and even inanimate objects are "born" and have spirits. In the folktale of Huanghe Chaotian (黄河朝天), Hmong claim that they are punished by nature because of the greediness they expressed in their excessive reclamation and farming of land (He 2020). This folktale shows that the Hmong consider the treatment of nature to be a moral issue. Thus, the Hmong have a non-human-centered perspective

that is different from the human chauvinistic perspective of many modern and Western cultures. Additionally, the Hmong believe that all of their ancestors came from eggs hatched by a "mother butterfly" and so every human has moral value in their community. That is, they think that all Hmong are created equal (He and Shi 2008).

In this paper, I want to explore whether the Hmong religion can shed new light on how to understand non-human-centered environmentalism. I do this by answering three sets of questions. First, "What is the Hmong religion?", "How do they practice their religion?", and "Why is their religion deeply connected to nature?" Second, "How should we understand the Hmong worldview as a philosophical contribution to environmental ethics?" Finally, "How does the Hmong view of the moral status of nature fit into the current debates about the moral status of nature in environmental ethics?".

2. The Hmong Worldview and Environmental Ethics

There are 4 to 5 million Hmong people around the world today. They live in China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Western countries like the US and Australia. Because of their migration and the influence of other cultures, the current Hmong generations might not hold traditional Hmong worldviews—in fact, they might not even know about them. It cannot be said that the worldviews I am talking about in this paper can cover all, or even the majority of, modern Hmong people's worldviews. Rather, the worldviews I am talking about are traditional Hmong views of the world and nature as expressed in their epics (oral traditions), folk stories, ceremonies, and language.

When I speak of "worldviews", I mean "a broad perspective on life and the universe" that is "indicative of a person's philosophy" (Runco 2014). More specifically, we can think of a worldview as "a collection of beliefs about life and the universe … from which one sees and interprets the world" (Fitton et al. 2007). This definition of worldview is importantly different from the definition provided by environmentalist Bryan Norton (1984, 1995a, 1995b). For Norton, a worldview includes fully supported scientific theories and a metaphysical framework for interpreting those theories, as well as a set of rationally supported aesthetic and moral ideals (Norton 1984). Norton's concept of worldview is particularly systematic and specialized, and many perspectives (including the traditional Hmong worldview) would be excluded by his definition.

Worldviews normally answer at least the following three fundamental questions: "How should we understand ourselves?" or "What is our place in the world?", "How should we understand others?" or "How are we related to other species?", and "How should we understand the world/environment itself?" or "What is the nature of the world or environment?" Answers to these three questions help to create a person's worldview.

Therefore, in order to better understand the traditional Hmong worldview, we need to understand how the Hmong people have answered the above questions. Thus, in what follows, I will explain the traditional Hmong answers to these questions. To anticipate the following discussion, their answers are roughly as follows:

1. Animism: The Hmong religion is animistic. According to animism, there is divinity in all things (both animate and inanimate). According to their animistic beliefs, nature is a god or divinity, and these beliefs importantly color the Hmong perspective of the world.
2. Non-Uniqueness: Hmong people think that human beings are not unique. In other words, the Hmong do not think that humans have a unique place in the world.
3. Non-Anthropocentrism: Hmong people think that all species (including non-humans) have a spirit, and therefore have moral value independent of how useful they are to humans.

Hmong religious beliefs are animistic (Her-Xiong and Schroepfer 2018). Animism is the view that every object (both animate and inanimate) is living in the sense that it is endowed with a spirit. Thus, humans, plants, animals, and even inanimate objects, such as rocks, are endowed with a soul or spirit. As Nicholas Tapp writes, "The Hmong are pantheists, believing in a variety of natural and super-natural spiritual forces living in and

animating all things. The Hmong world is inhabited by a variety of natural, ancestral, and supernatural spirits or gods" (Tapp 1989).

The Hmong religion is mainly based on the following beliefs: (1) Both humans and animals have souls, and souls are of great significance to human health or illness. (2) Household gods can protect the peace and happiness of a family. (3) Nature gods can harm people, and people can also protect each others' health. Household gods consist of door gods (dab roog), central pillar gods (dab ncej tas), destiny gods (xwm kab), and other gods who protect the well-being of the family. These gods play an important role in keeping family members happy and healthy. House gods are also called dab nyeg (taming gods). Gods of the forest, trees, stones, and water are all called "wild gods" ("dab qus" or nature gods). Obviously, the Hmong religion is like other similar animistic views or the belief that creatures are given life by a soul (Lee 1994–1995).

2.1. Animism

We can see their animism on display in many of their practices and rituals. For example, the Hmong community adheres to conventional medicinal approaches, which encompass animistic remedies and the therapeutic abilities of shamans (traditional healer). The traditional Hmong health model attributes most illnesses to temporary soul detachment or loss. Such separation may result from an accident, a terrifying experience, or the wrath of a disgruntled or offended spirit. Shamans possess the exclusive ability to communicate with the supernatural spirits that cause such maladies and restore the lost soul (Lor et al. 2017). And the souls that can hurt or offend human beings may be inside anything in nature. Cha wrote:

> *… there are trails, roads, bushes, swamps, rivers, lakes, mountains, fields, and other natural land features where the wild spirits (dab qus) dwell. Smaller natural objects such as trees, ant hills and boulders can also have spirits living in them. These spirits live among us as we conduct our daily activities. They are not necessarily evil, but when their personal spaces are violated or they are disrespected, they can cause the violator harm. The violators soul will be seized, and the person becomes ill.* (Cha 2010, p. 144)

Second, Hmong people's ceremony and rituals are always about achieving harmony with oneself, family ancestors, animals, nature's elements, and the spirits of the invisible realm. Hmong spiritual practices often aim to restore this balance that may have been lost (Willcox 1986). Take the example of the ritual called Ntoo Xeeb, which is performed by the elders of Mae Sa Mai Village, located in Tambol Pong Yareng, Mae Rim District, Thailand, about 30 km north of Chiang Mai. The purpose of the Ntoo Xeeb ceremony is to mediate between various types of spirits for the benefit of the village. The shaman acts as a mediator between the four local spirits, including Ntoo Xeeb, which represents the wild forest and mountains, and the male heads of households who interact with the spirits of inhabited places. The clan elders, on the other hand, act as intermediaries for the ancestral spirits and work together with the shaman to bless the male heads of households. During important occasions, such as New Year celebrations, weddings, and funerals, the community comes together to perform the ritual system and fulfill mutual obligations. In this way, the younger generation relies on the elders for spiritual guidance and wisdom, while the elders rely on the support and participation of the younger generation to uphold the shared Hmong belief system (Huang and Sumrongthong 2004).

2.2. Non-Uniqueness

Now that we have seen aspects of animism in the Hmong religion, let us look at some evidence for the claim that the Hmong do not view humans as occupying a special place in nature. For centuries, the Hmong community has relied on their oral tradition as an essential element of their shared culture. This tradition is their sole means of preserving their collective memory and is a valuable inheritance that has been passed down through the generations (Lemoine 2009).

The epic *Mother Butterfly*, a collection of songs from the oral tradition of Hmong people in Southwest China, tells the story of a world where everything is alive and describes the birth of humankind.

> *… She courted with Wave Foam;*
>
> *they played beside a clear water pool; in a muddy pool, fish and shrimp frolicked.*
>
> *Butterfly and Wave Foam courted and later became a couple.*
>
> *For how many years was Butterfly married?*
>
> *She was married for twelve years and laid the Twelve Eggs.* (Bender 2006, p. 115)
>
> *… When they were all born,*
>
> *they slept together in the nest.*
>
> *The white one was Gha Hva;*
>
> *The black one was Jang Vang;*
>
> *the bright one was the Thunder God; the yellow one was the Water Dragon; the striped one was Tiger;*
>
> *and the long one was Snake.* (Bender 2006, p. 120)

The above poems describe the birth of Butterfly Mother from the heart of the sweet gum tree and how the mother butterfly was soaked in the foam of breaking waves and laid twelve eggs on the branches of a gum tree. Over the course of twelve years, the eggs hatched into various entities (thunder, water dragon, tiger, snake, etc.), as well as a boy named Jang Vang and his younger sister, who are believed to be the ancestors of human beings. The song of Butterfly Mother was only performed by ritual specialists every twelve or seven years during sacrifices made to the ancestors.

The Hmong epic describes humans and non-humans as originating from the same source, the same mother, i.e., the Butterfly Mother. This implies that humans and non-humans are siblings and thus do not have a unique origin. This is a stark contrast with the origin stories in the Judeo-Christian tradition in which humans and animal are created separately and in different ways. According to the latter tradition, only humans are made "in the image of god".

Moreover, it is clear that human ancestors play the same role as other eggs in the song. The birth of human beings appears in many mythological folktales, and in the Hmong stories, the birth of human beings is accompanied by the birth of other species. The most important thing is that the birth of humans is no different than the birth of the other ten species. I think it is plausible that the fact that the birth of humankind was treated as being just as important as that of other species affected how Hmong people came to think of their importance relative to other species. That is, it influenced the Hmong view that humans are not special relative to other species.

2.3. Non-Anthropocentrism

The Hmong also seem to think of non-human animals and other parts of nature as having value independent of their usefulness for benefitting human needs and desires. That is, the Hmong have a non-anthropocentric view of nature. We can begin to get a sense of this by looking at the way they talk about nature. Professor Ma writes in the paper "苗族文化习俗中的生命伦理与'神性产权'" (Life Ethics and the View of Divine Property Reflected in Miao People's Cultural Customs)that even Hmong languages show their respect to other beings and nature. For example, they have an expression for the act of "bathing in the river", which is "Nghud wub". The underlying meaning of this expression, which is used to signal the interaction between people and the river, is "to be a guest at the river house, to visit". In the eastern (Western Hunan) dialect of Hmong, the word "Nghud" means "to visit". More specifically, "Nghud" means to visit relatives, friends, brothers, sisters, and lovers. Therefore, Nghud wub means to visit the river just as one would visit

a relative or friend. Another example is, in the Xiangxi dialect of the Hmong language, the proper term for a labor of "cutting firewood on the mountain" is Rangs deul, which originally meant "to ask (pray) for firewood to return home". And in the Xiangxi dialect, "Rang" means "to ask for help or cooperation in accomplishing something". For example, "Rangs zos" means to ask for help; "Rangs nex" means to ask for help to work. Hmong people also use the expression "Hox del" to refer to cutting firewood, which means "inviting or begging woods to home". Similarly, they use the expression "Rangs mloul" when they are going down to the river to catch fish, and this expression literally means "to invite the fish home" (Ma 2017).

From the above linguistic examples, it is obvious that the Hmong culture has a direct and clear perception of natural objects (like animals, forests, or rivers) as having more than just instrumental value. That is, they treat parts of nature as if they have value over and above their value to benefit human needs and desires.

We can also get a sense of the Hmong's non-anthropocentrism by looking at how these treat nature in their daily lives. Let us start by considering how the Hmong treat certain forests. First, there are forests in which no Hmong is supposed to enter or perform any activity. Such prohibitions apply to the Forests for Propitiating the Lord of the Land. The Hmong are supposed to protect the wildlife in this area as well. Second, there are forests that can be entered but that no one is supposed to cut down trees in or go hunting. One example of this kind of forest is the Cemetery Forests Where the People and Their Spirits Are Laid to Rest. Third, there are forests in which no agriculture or human settlement is permitted, e.g., Forests Near Three Headed Mountains. There are also general rules for extracting things from forests. For example, the Hmong are not supposed to drag anything they have cut down for firewood, as firewood should be cut neatly from the tree (e.g., branches should not be snapped off or trees pushed over), and they should not complain about the resources they have collected (e.g., by referring to a plant as "inedible") (Highland Mapping Development and Biodiversity Management Project (HMD and BMP 2006), pp. 47–48).

Even when interacting with forests in which hunting and gathering plants is permitted, permission must be given by the Lord of the Land. For example, hunters need to make a sacrifice to the mountain god before entering the mountain to hunt. This is because they believe that the mountain god manages or owns the animals and plants on the mountain. Therefore, whether hunters are successful in hunting actually depends on whether the mountain god allows them to succeed. Similarly, harvesting plants from mountains or forests for medicine also requires nature's consent.

According to the locals in Khun Changian, healers are always traditionalists because of a special connection they can build with nature. The way a person becomes a healer is through a collaboration with a healing spirit called Yu waaj. This spirit allows the healer to know which plants are necessary for a patient's illness and also makes the plants powerful in their healing abilities. Because only the healers can collect the plants for medicine, it effectively prevents the plants from being overharvested. Also, the harvest of plants by others who are without the consent of nature is also seen as a taboo (Desantiago 2020).

The Hmong also have rules concerning what they must do before they can kill an animal. When it comes to wild animals, they must perform a ritual asking the Lord of the Land for permission to hunt there. After they have finished hunting, they do not need to perform any other rituals. However, if they want to kill a domesticated animal, they must perform further rituals (HMD and BMP 2006, p. 48). They are not allowed to kill unfamiliar kinds of animals that they encounter while hunting. This is because the spirit of a relative might be visiting them through that animal (HMD and BMP 2006, p. 48). They are also not allowed to kill large snakes, because they believe that the spirit of the Lord of the Land is in them (HMD and BMP 2006, pp. 48–49). They are also not allowed to kill barn owls, because they are thought of a "spirit birds". Finally, they are not allowed to kill animals that "cry out" when they are being hunted (HMD and BMP 2006, p. 49).

Even the treatment of certain bodies of water is constrained by certain rules. For example, it is impermissible to play or throw rocks into lakes or ponds that have water year-round and the headwaters of streams. These areas house Naga, the guardian of the water, or other spirits and thus should not be disturbed (HMD and BMP 2006, p. 51).

There are also rules for agriculture. In the Hmong folktale called "Huanghe Chaotian", it says that "黄河朝天, 黄水治死人烟; 黄河朝地, 黄水治死人意" (translation: when the Yellow River flows to the sky, the yellow water kills the vitality of the land; when the Yellow River flows to the earth, the yellow water kills the will of the people.) (He 2020). Hmong people cleared the wild land without restraint and planted what they needed without balancing natural resources. They did this so much so that they were punished by nature and lost their homes and lives when floods poured in from Huanghe (the Yellow River). The Hmong claim that they were punished by nature for their greediness. This punishment is from nature or, more precisely, the divinity in nature that is above all creatures.

In fact, if the Hmong fail to treat forests, plants, animals, and water in the prescribed ways, then they will be punished by nature (or the gods in nature). This strongly indicates that, for the Hmong, nature is not something they have dominion over and which can be subjected to their own whims. Moreover, because the Hmong seem to think the punishment for violating these rules is deserved, they seem to view the treatment of nature as a moral issue. That is, they seem to treat the rules created by the divine for the treatment of nature as moral rules that they are bound by.

All of these examples (e.g., requiring the consent of the mountain gods or nature to hunt) shows that Hmong people worship and respect nature (HMD and BMP 2006, p. 59). The Hmong people believe that human beings should respect nature and even fear it, seeing it as a god-like being whose laws and rules they are willing to live under. We can see their non-anthropocentrism even in the way they conceptualize their way of life as "living *with* the forest [my emphasis]" as opposed to living in or by the forest (HMD and BMP 2006, p. 59).

It is true that humans are allowed to use animals and other non-human parts of nature for their own purposes. However, this use is limited to exactly what the Hmong need. Overharvesting, overfishing, overhunting, and other wasteful behavior and so on are forbidden (HMD and BMP 2006, p. 47). If the Hmong viewed non-human nature as purely instrumentally valuable, they would not be concerned with such wasteful behavior.

Why do the Hmong treat nature this way? The answer seems to be that there is something divine (i.e., spirits) in all things (Ma 2017). Their reverence for the "divinity" in nature explains why the Hmong are respectful in their attitudes toward and treatment of nature. Because they think that the divine dwells in all of nature, they are motivated to treat nature with respect and to help it flourish.

2.4. A Caveat

Before going on to see how the Hmong view of environmental ethics fits into the conceptual space carved out by Western environmental ethics, it is important to qualify the Hmong view. The view of Hmong environmental ethics that I have been sketching here is not a systematic and conscious attempt on the part of the Hmong to construct a fully general, universal, or consistent system of ethics. As Nicholas Tapp wrote:

> [T]he kind of traditional morality we might expect to find among the Hmong, should not be of an ethicised, universalistic/absolute kind; there should be no generalized, decontextualised, semantic or purely cognitive conception of absolute standards of good or evil, for example, which would be separable from the social structure of the Hmong, but that ethical standards among the Hmong would traditionally be relative to the social structure, and vary according to social distance. (Tapp 2002, p. 97)

> In particular, the Hmong view, according to Tapp, is a kind of relativism. What a Hmong person is morally required to do or refrain from doing depends, in part, on the person to whom she is doing it or who the person acting is. For

> example, Tapp suggests killing a human outside of their community might not be considered murder and that while adultery committed by a female is "heinous", adultery committed by a male is not. (Tapp 2002, p. 97)

However, this does not mean that the Hmong think that outsiders are allowed to do whatever they want to nature (e.g., enter or disturb the Forests for Propitiating the Lord of the Land). They seem to think that these rules apply to everyone. After all, these are sacred places, and no one is allowed to disturb them. For example, the Hmong of Qianxinan Buyei (an autonomous prefecture of Guizhou Province in China) have protected various sacred mountains and prevented outsiders from collecting firewood or grass from these mountains (He and Shi 2008, p. 68).

We should also note that how a Hmong is supposed to treat some parts of non-human nature does not depend solely on the nature of that thing but on its relationship to the environment it is part of and the relationship of that thing to the community at large. For example, while one is not even permitted to enter or engage in activity in the Forests for Propitiating the Lord of the Land, one is allowed to enter and engage in activities in other forests. And given a Hmong's relationship with domesticated animals, it is required to perform a ritual before killing such animals, but just rituals are not required before killing wild animals (assuming one has permission to hunt in the first place). Even though how the Hmong are allowed to treat certain parts of non-human nature partly depends on their relationship with those things, not even this view is anthropocentric. This is because anthropocentrism views non-human parts of nature as having only instrumental value, i.e., value as a tool for benefiting humans. This implies that whether one should treat some part of nature well depends solely on whether it can be used to achieve some human end. But, clearly, the protected forests are respected for reasons other than what they can be used to produce.

Finally, while the Hmong do not seem to view non-human nature as below them or less morally important than them, they do seem to treat certain parts of non-human nature this way. For example, they do hunt animals for food and use them for sacrifices. However, how they treat animals is a function of which spirits are in the animals and what the nature gods require of them. For example, as we saw, they do not kill large snakes because the Lord of the Land might be in them. When they sacrifice animals, they do so because they believe it is required by the nature gods. Similar things are true about how they treat certain trees. For example, large trees are thought to have different spirits than small trees, such that they are permitted to cut down small ones but not big ones. Likewise, they are not allowed to cut down or otherwise disturb trees that are next to temples (He and Xia 2010, p. 23).

This means, among other things, that their rules about how to treat nature are not general, e.g., one rule about how to treat one animal need not apply to others. They cannot hunt barn owls, but they are permitted to hunt other kinds of owls. Therefore, as Tapp noted, their ethics are deeply contextual.

3. Hmong Environmental Ethics and Western Environmental Ethics

Unlike Hmong people, modern humans cannot have a harmonious relationship with the environment and treat themselves as having the same essence or spirit as all other beings. Today, modern humans create a lot of environmental problems that are already out of control in many ways. We even face other new, dangerous situations like e-waste and nuclear power. It looks like we cannot ignore the current problems we have concerning nature. Therefore, we need to change the "human-centered" or "human-only" ethical perspective in order to behave and act better towards nature. In sum, classic Western ethical theories are not suited for all of today's moral issues anymore. It is urgent to look for other worldviews to ground our behavior and actions toward nature.

In Western environmental ethics, philosophers have been interested in what has moral significance or value and what kind of value it has (e.g., value merely as a tool or value in its own right. If something has moral value in its own right, we have reason to treat it with

respect and to give it consideration in our practical deliberations. Environmental ethicists have defended a variety of positions concerning what has moral value or moral value in its own right. In this section, I explain the broad views that environmental ethicists have defended concerning what has moral value and moral value in its own right.

One common distinction is between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric views. Anthropocentrism is the view that only humans have moral value in their own right, and thus, non-human nature has moral value only insofar as it can be used to benefit the needs and desires of humans. Non-anthropocentrism, in its broadest interpretation, is just the denial of anthropocentrism. Thus, non-anthropocentrists might hold that nothing has moral value in its own right, e.g., because all value is subjective (McShane 2007, p. 171). However, it is also common for non-anthropocentrists to hold that nature either has non-instrumental value or is morally valuable in its own right. Thus, this version of non-anthropocentrism is not a version of holism, because it does not claim that the *only thing* that has moral value in its own right is nature or ecosystems. Rather, this view is that both human and non-human natures have moral values in their own right (McShane 2007, p. 171; 2009, pp. 407–8).

Another important distinction concerning what has moral value is between individualistic and holistic views. Individualism claims that it is individuals (e.g., humans, animals, plants, etc.) that have moral value in their own right and that the larger wholes that these individuals make up (e.g., species, ecosystems, the biosphere, etc.) have moral value solely by virtue of being made up of these valuable individuals. Holism claims that wholes or collections (e.g., species, ecosystems, or the biosphere) have moral value in their own right and individuals derive their moral value from the roles they play in this larger whole (McShane 2009).

A related distinction is between biocentrism and non-biocentrism. Biocentrism claims that it is *living* things (e.g., humans, animals, plants, etc.) that have moral value in their own right while non-living things have moral value only by virtue of being related to living things. Non-biocentrism can be seen as just the denial of biocentrism. Most often, biocentrists are individualists while most non-biocentrists are holists. For example, the most common form of non-biocentrism is ecocentrism, which claims that it is ecosystems that have moral value in their own right, and individuals have moral value only by virtue of playing a certain role in an ecosystem.

However, it is possible to hold a holistic biocentric view. In this view, the primary bearer of moral value would be some collection of living things, and individual living things would be valuable by virtue of being part of this collection. One could also hold an individualist non-biocentric view. In this view, what has moral value in its own right is individuals, but these individuals need not be living things. However, these non-living individuals would still be physical entities (e.g., rocks or gains of sand). As we will see, the Hmong view posits non-physical spirits as the bearers of ultimate value and so non-biocentric (Desantiago 2017, pp. 69, 72).

Finally, there is a distinction between egalitarianism and non-egalitarianism. According to egalitarianism, all things that have moral value in their own right are equally morally valuable. According to non-egalitarianism, some things have greater moral value than other things. For example, Paul Taylor defended a version of biocentric egalitarianism, according to which, all living things have equal moral value (Taylor 1986).

How does the Hmong view of the moral status of nature fit into the current debates about the moral status of nature in environmental ethics? I will argue that the Hmong worldview can be understood as an individualist, non-egalitarian, and non-anthropocentric view. Whether their view is non-biocentric depends on what one means by "bios".

As I argued above, the Hmong worldview is non-anthropocentric. First, the Hmong do not treat all parts of non-human nature as if their value lies only in the fact that they can be used to benefit humans. In fact, as we saw, there are many rules against using parts of nature as a mere tool (e.g., not overhunting or overharvesting). Second, their view seems to deny that humans have moral value in their own right. Humans, just like everything else, have moral value only because they have spirits or souls that are divine. However, it

is not non-anthropocentric in the traditional sense, because it also denies that non-human nature has moral value in its own right.

Support for the Hmong worldview as an individualist view comes from the idea that every individual thing in the world has a spirit or soul in it and that it is these spirits or souls that give individuals their moral value. It is not the collection of all things that has a spirit or soul, nor is it ecosystems that have them. Rather, it is the individuals that make up the natural world. Notice further that the rules that the Hmong have for treating non-human nature concern particular forests, bodies of water, etc.

This relationship between individuals in the natural world and the value-giving spirits is analogous to how Tom Regan parsed the relationship between humans and animals and what has ultimate moral value according to utilitarians. Regan wrote:

> Suppose we think of moral agents and patients as cups into which may be poured either sweet liquids (pleasures) or bitter brews (pains). At any given time, each cup will have a certain hedonic flavor: the liquid it contains will be more or less sweet or bitter. Now, what we are to aim to bring about, according to hedonistic Utilitarianism, is not the best-tasting liquid for this or that particular individual; rather, what we must aim to achieve is the best aggregated balance of the sweet and the bitter among all those individuals affected by what we do; it is the best total balance of the sweet over the bitter that we aim to realize. That being so, there is no reason why it may not be necessary to redistribute the contents of any given cup among the others or, indeed, why it may not be necessary to destroy a given cup ("receptacle") quite completely". (Regan 2004, p. 298)

According to Regan, utilitarians view humans and animals as analogous to cups and their desires or feelings as the liquid that can fill those cups. What is non-derivatively valuable for utilitarians is desire satisfaction or experiencing pleasure, and we have moral reasons to treat humans and animals well by virtue of them being containers or receptacles of desire satisfaction or experiences of pleasure. Thus, for utilitarians, humans and animals are only derivatively valuable. In particular, they are valuable only insofar as they can be receptacles of desire satisfaction or pleasurable experiences.

We can understand Hmong people's perspective toward all things with a similar framework. For the Hmong, as for utilitarianism, objects (e.g., humans and animals) are valuable only because they are the containers or receptacles of something else. For the Hmong, humans, animals, and all of nature are valuable because they are containers or receptacles of divine spirits or souls.

Support for the claim that the Hmong worldview is non-egalitarian comes from the fact that they think it is permissible to use non-human parts of nature for their own benefit, although there are important limitations to this. For example, they are permitted to hunt wild animals and sacrifice animals during religious ceremonies. But, of course, they are not allowed to hunt or sacrifice their neighbors. This does not mean that they deny that non-human parts of nature have the same kind of value as humans. Rather, all that seems to follow is that they think there is a hierarchy of value and humans are above other non-human parts of nature.

However, there is a difference between the actual beliefs of the Hmong concerning the value of non-human nature and how they actually treat it. Their myths and language imply that they view at least certain parts of nature as kin. But the way they treat non-human nature is non-egalitarian. I think that their treatment of non-human nature is an indication not of how they view non-human nature but of how they view the requirements of nature gods.

Why think that the Hmong worldview is non-biocentric? This is because what has moral value in its own right is divine spirits, and individuals in nature have moral value only insofar as they have these souls. These spirits are non-biotic in the sense that they are not alive in the way that plants, animals, and humans are alive. For example, living beings (a) have bodies that consume nutrients and use energy, (b) grow and maintain their bodies, (c) regulate their internal environment (e.g., body temperature), (d) reproduce, (e) respond

to stimuli in their environment, (f) have various processes that aim at maintaining their own health and life, and so on. It is far from clear that the spirits that the Hmong believe are in all creatures have all (or even most) of these features. Thus, what has moral value in its own right is non-biotic.

However, we need not understand "bios", i.e., life, as only referring to *physical* life. For example, the Jains in India also think that everything has a soul or spirit (jīva), but they define life as sentience (i.e., the capacity to feel pleasure and pain). In this view, souls are alive, because it is souls that are sentient. Bodies are merely shells or containers for living entities. According to Jains, these souls (jīva) are a diverse array of beings in addition to humans, e.g., plants, rocks, air, water, earth, and so on (Vallely 2014, p. 40). There is even a hierarchy of beings depending on how many senses they have (Vallely 2014, pp. 41–42). Thus, if one thinks of life as being conscious, for example, then the Hmong are also biocentrists, because they think that at least human souls are conscious. It is, after all, the human soul of a deceased person that must travel to the afterlife and ask to be reborn (Her 2005, pp. 20–21).

One might be concerned that there is a conflict in the Hmong view between the fact that it is non-biocentric and the fact that it is non-anthropocentric in the traditional sense. Normally, non-biocentric views are non-anthropocentric. This is because the non-biocentric view emphasizes that non-living systems or collections (e.g., ecosystems) are the only things that have value in their own right, and thus, it is not humans (either individually or collectively) that are valuable in their own right. However, the Hmong view is non-biocentric not because it claims that systems or collections are the only things that are valuable in their own right. Rather, they are non-biocentric, on one understanding of non-biocentric, because they deny that any living thing (in the physical sense) has value in its own right. This version of non-biocentrism entails that humans also do not have value in their own right. The Hmong claim that the only things that have value in their own right are spirits. But this is consistent with claiming that everything else, including systems and living things, have value insofar as they have a spirit. It is just that the value of all non-spirits is derivative toward the value of the spirit that is in them, and thus, non-spirits are not valuable in their own right.

4. Conclusions

In this article, I explained some of the basics of the Hmong worldview influenced by their religion and showed how this worldview can serve as the basis of a novel version of environmental ethics that is non-anthropocentric, individualistic, non-egalitarian, biocentric/non-biocentric (depending on what one means by "bios". My aim has been to articulate Hmong environmental ethics and to situate them into the larger literature on environmental ethics.

The Hmong environmental ethics that I discussed could provide non-anthropocentric reasons for policymakers to endorse environmentally friendly policies. If policymakers were to take seriously the sacredness of many parts of nature for the Hmong, they would recommend policies that treat these forests, mountains, and bodies of water as more than mere tools for human benefit. If something is sacred, then its protection is not negotiable and not subject to utilitarian maximizing calculations. For example, if some non-sacred piece of land was valuable only because of what it can produce for human needs, then it could be destroyed or harmed in order to protect another non-sacred piece of land that provided even more benefits for humans. But this is not true with sacred places. Sacred places do not allow for such trade-offs. Therefore, if environmental policymakers were to take the Hmong environmental ethics seriously, they would have to treat certain parts of nature as more than just instrumentally valuable.

Such policies would align with the values of many non-anthropocentrists. Of course, some of these anthropocentrists believe that nature is valuable in its own right and not just because it is sacred to certain people. But, at the policy level, which is concerned primarily with action and not reasons for acting, there would be little difference between the policies guided by Hmong environmental ethics and the policies guided by other non-anthropocentric views.

Of course, one important difference is that the Hmong environmental ethics outlined here have the clearest policy implications for the parts of non-human nature that surround the Hmong communities and which the Hmong treat as sacred. In this way, the Hmong environmental ethics discussed herein have narrower implications than a wider non-anthropocentrism that does not base the value of nature on its sacredness to a certain group of people. Nonetheless, the policy implications of these Hmong environmental ethics are still crucially different than those of a purely anthropocentric environmental ethics.

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